

Article

# Artistic Practices as a Site of Human Rights: How Performative Ethnography Can Facilitate a Deeper Contextual Understanding

Tine Destrooper\* and Sofie Verclyte

## Abstract

There has been, in the past two decades, more scholarly attention for how rights-holders understand human rights norms, and how these understandings interact with pre-existing notions of (social) justice. This attention for rights-holders' lived experiences can be linked to the growing influence of socio-legal and legal anthropological perspectives, as well as to that of emancipatory research methods, such as participatory action research. What these perspectives and methods have in common is their interest in how people experience and express their rights in practice, and how they give meaning to them. Remarkably little attention, however, has been paid to the question of *how* we try to understand this process of meaning-making. The dominant modes of engagement tend to (a) emphasize the spoken or written word, and (b) presume—the possibility of—an accessible verbal narrative. The shortcomings of engaging exclusively on the basis of verbal language becomes clear when considering the lived experience of certain particularly vulnerable groups, such as displaced people who are coping with ongoing violence and trauma or who have been forced into silence for years. Not everyone can speak freely about their lived experience or can tell a coherent story about it, and adopting an—exclusively—word-driven engagement strategy may reproduce existing power relations. Based on preliminary fieldwork with refugees from Syria in the Shatila refugee camp, we argue that a performative ethnography rooted in collaborative making and artistic practice is a promising way to engage with and understand how people make sense of their lived experience, as it allows research participants to express themselves using those (skilled and artistic) practices most familiar to them. We

\* Tine Destrooper ([tine.destrooper@ugent.be](mailto:tine.destrooper@ugent.be)) is an Associate Professor at Ghent University's, Human Rights Centre, Universiteitsstraat 4, 9000 Ghent, Belgium. Sofie Verclyte is a researcher investigating at the School of Arts (HoGent), Ghent, Belgium.

reflect on how a practice-driven mode of engagement may shed a different light on how people make sense of questions related to justice and their rights.

**Keywords:** artistic practice; forced displacement; performative ethnography; vernacularization

## 1. Introduction

In the past two decades, the question of how people make sense of what their rights are and how this affects their daily lives has given rise to a wealth of innovative studies and debates that foreground rights-holders' lived realities and the practice of human rights. But what do we mean when we speak of the practice of human rights? And what methods and ways of engaging do we rely on to capture this? Even studies that aim to bring new voices and ideas to the debate have remained relatively close to our dominant understanding of what practices—and narratives—of human rights look like, and of how we can capture these. More specifically, despite growing attention for the practice of human rights, for lived realities of rights-holders and for emancipatory research, human rights research continues to be characterized by a limited range of methods to engage with rights-holders. These methods focus on those ways of engaging and those narratives that are most easily recognizable as human rights (practices), and have a strong focus on verbal modes of expression.

However, when working with vulnerable people, such as displaced people, whose (self-)identification as rights-holders is often compromised (Pantazidou 2013: 270), it is important to examine how people articulate and enact their understandings of rights and justice, including in non-verbal ways. In these cases it is of particular importance to find relevant modes of engaging that can provide insights into how these people seek to bear witness to and make sense of rights violations, such as forced displacement and repression (Eastmond 2007: 248). This article stems from our concern that modes of engagement that expect people to *talk* about these issues are not per se the most appropriate way to arrive at a deep contextual understanding of their lived experience of violations and injustice, nor of their agency or resources in the face thereof.

As Anderson Hooker and Schiff (2019) ask, does a paradigm exist outside a discursive framework of law, rights, or justice that allows for a radically different understanding of what rights and justice mean to people whose rights have been violated? To start to address this question we examine how our understanding of human rights practice changes if we shift the focus from familiar narratives and practices of human rights to the question of how skilled artistic practice (such as embroidery or weaving) can be studied as a site where people, including vulnerable groups such as displaced people, make sense of human rights and (in)justice. What methods are needed to move beyond verbal ways of interacting with people to capture the many other ways in which people express ideals about justice?

We explore the added value of a collaborative performative ethnography focused on co-making and artistic practices as a promising mode of engagement with research participants, namely one that (a) is in line with emancipatory human rights research, (b) genuinely starts from the lived realities of rights-holders and acknowledges them as (meaning-)makers and agents, and (c) allows for alternative ways of knowing and knowledge-generation (including non-linear ones) that acknowledge 'ecologies of knowledges and an artisanship of practices' (De Sousa Santos 2018: 16).

We became aware of the emancipatory potential of this mode of engagement during preliminary fieldwork for a broader research and artistic project on how the Syrian conflict and following displacement altered artistic practices of artisans living in the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut. As part of this project, the second author, who is herself a skilled maker, carried out preliminary fieldwork in the refugee camp in the Spring of 2020, to map the nature and meaning of the artisan practices of refugees from Syria in this camp. During this preliminary mapping exercise, the great potential of a performative ethnography, also beyond this artistic aim, became apparent: jointly engaging in artistic practice and exploring its meaning offers interesting avenues to explore meaning-making in the domain of human rights and justice, that is, how sense is made of these abstract concepts through concrete practices. In this article, we focus on the artistic practice of embroidery to develop our proposal for a collaborative performative ethnography because of the rich textile tradition in the region and embroidery's potential role in meaning-making, resistance, (identity) formation and memorialization (Mansour 2018).

Adopting this method means that we look in new places for answers to the question of how people make sense of their rights and justice (writ large). We argue that this innovative methodology is complementary with other emancipatory methods and can enhance the local relevance and remedy certain blind spots of some of these methods.<sup>1</sup> Arts-based and non-verbal approaches are, moreover, frequently used methods in design and the social sciences more broadly because of their emancipatory, ethical, and epistemic benefits. Yet they have not deeply penetrated into the field of human rights research.

In the remainder of this article, we first outline the theoretical and methodological background against which we formulate our proposal, as well as the specific case study, before we turn to the nature, potential and challenges of our methodological proposal.

## 2. Theoretical and methodological background to the proposal

Theory permeates almost every aspect of research—even if the author does not recognize its influence (Collins and Stockton 2018: 2). We therefore first outline how existing theoretical and methodological frameworks influence our methodological proposal. Two evolutions rooted in the critical and reflexive turn of the 1990s are particularly relevant to our proposal: the increased importance of legal anthropological and socio-legal human rights research, and the growing popularity of emancipatory and participatory research methods.

### 2.1 Legal anthropology and socio-legal approaches to human rights

The growing importance of legal anthropology and socio-legal studies led to an increased concern with how various actors use—(the language of)—human rights, and with the practice of human rights more generally. This double emphasis on actors and on practice is crucial to our methodological proposal.

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1 We do not go so far as to conceptualize collaborative performative ethnography as a tool to foster legal consciousness or achieve some of the more activist aims of typical Participatory Action Research methodologies, but we do argue that they have an emancipatory potential in that they acknowledge and take as a starting point the lived experience and episteme of the research respondents, and that they allow for further emancipatory work on that basis.

Actor-oriented approaches propose to study rights from the point of view of ‘actual struggles informed by people’s own understandings of what they are justly entitled to’ (Nyamu-Musembi 2002: 31). Examining rights in this way, makes it possible to ‘transcend accepted normative parameters of human rights debates, question established conceptual categories and expand the range of claims that are validated as rights’ (Ibid.: 31). It also goes beyond ‘a call for attention to context’ and instead foregrounds the concrete experiences of the particular actors ‘who are involved in, and who stand to gain directly from, the struggles in question’ (Ibid.: 32). Actor-oriented approaches start from the normative position that the protection offered through human rights should be improved, especially if this entails an expansion of the range of claims that is validated by formal institutions as rights claims. They, thus, work with notions of rights as formulated by those actors that are most affected, and propose to study how people articulate rights claims in specific situations and which strategies they deem most relevant for this (Gready and Robins 2014). This approach implies consideration for a variety of perceptions and understandings of human rights, far beyond human rights law (Desmet 2014). It visualizes actors, processes, problems and solutions that would otherwise remain under-exposed (Evrard et al. 2021). Such an approach is particularly relevant in the context of refugees and forced displacement, as it also emphasizes the importance of working hand-in-hand with vulnerable people to deconstruct their vulnerability, to ‘recognize a sense of agency for their rights that is meaningful to their everyday lives’ (Pantazidou 2013: 268), and to ensure reciprocal benefit (Arstein-Kerslake et al. 2019; Pittaway et al. 2010).

The focus on actors inevitably coincided with a focus on the practice of human rights, and more specifically, the two-fold question of (a) how people interact with their rights and (b) how universal human rights norms interact with local realities. Sally Merry (2000) describes this process of human rights vernacularization as the transformation that takes place when local understandings interact with, and give meaning to, global discourses. Scholars writing in her tradition have argued that in order for international human rights norms to become effective they need to be translated into local terms and situated within local contexts of power and meaning (Destrooper 2019; Gómez 2014; Levitt and Merry 2009). As Goodale and Merry (2007) argue, ‘local practice, is essential to the development of living ideas of human rights’, and views of non-elites are important to consider because they conceptualize the idea of human rights more consequentially than elites. Moreover, actions at the local level can, sometimes more effectively, contribute to the realization of human rights, even when they are not framed as human rights work (Desmet 2014). Considering these local practices and how they interact with global discourses holds the promise of shifting the parameters of the debate toward an interpretation that becomes more reflective of rights-holders’ own experience, thus inviting rights-holders to engage more actively with the global discourse of human rights (Destrooper 2016a: 95).

It is crucial, however, to consider not only how rights-holders vernacularize existing human rights norms, but also how their priorities and practices can become a source of new human rights norms that facilitate a ground-up process of norm-setting. This concern with capturing—and eventually upstreaming—local understandings led scholars to pay more attention to how local practices can inspire formal and informal global discourse on and understandings of human rights (De Gaay Fortman 2011; Destrooper 2016b). This attention for the local origins of human rights (De Feyter et al. 2011: 14) is also in line with scholarship foregrounding epistemologies and practices from the South (De Sousa Santos 2018, see below).

## 2.2 Emancipatory research methods

The focus on actor-oriented approaches and vernacularization coincided with the growing popularity of emancipatory research methodologies (such as PAR).<sup>2</sup> We use the term ‘emancipatory research methods’ to refer to a diverse range of methodologies that explore new forms of knowledge production, and seek to mitigate power imbalances between researcher and research participant, while also attempting to bridge the divide between theory and practice, often through direct engagement (Arstein-Kerslake et al. 2019; Hale 2008; Lennox and Yıldız 2020; Speed 2006).<sup>3</sup> In this section, we highlight three core principles characterizing most of these methods.

First, they tend to be rooted in a normative commitment to social change. In its maximalist form, this goes back to the action research of the 1940s that sought to engender social outcomes and enhance human well-being (for example, Lewin 1946), and research in the context of civil rights and social movement studies of the 1960s (Arstein-Kerslake et al. 2019: 592), and often takes the shape of researchers and activists collaborating in politically engaged research (Boeykens 2019; Lennox and Yıldız 2020). In a more moderate form, the commitment to social change can also be implicitly mainstreamed into research design, for example by generating knowledge jointly and pursuing collaboration on a more equal footing.

This focus on participation and collaboration is a second characteristic of most emancipatory research methods. Knowledge production is seen here as a collaborative and interactive process between the researcher and those directly affected by rights violations (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Denzin and Lincoln 2017).<sup>4</sup> The latter are seen as ‘knowledgeable, empowered actors in the research process’ (Lennox and Yıldız 2020: 6), which implies that researchers must, to some extent, relinquish power and control to research participants, for example by co-designing the research (Stanley and Wise 1993; Hugman 2005).

A third characteristic of emancipatory human rights research methods is the adoption of a human rights-based approach (HRBA), which refers to organizing the process and outcome so that they comply with human rights standards, and adhering to core human rights principles such as non-discrimination, equality, participation and accountability (Gready and Vandenhoele 2014: 293).

## 2.3 Blind spots of the current debate

What the theoretical and methodological approaches above have in common is their normative commitment to capturing ‘voices from below’ and foregrounding the lived experiences of rights holders, as a way to increase the local relevance of human rights. This perspective shifted the terms of the debate, and made realities ‘on the ground’ more visible and voices of rights-holders more audible. Scholars and practitioners writing in these traditions, moreover, exposed several new research challenges, such as vicarious trauma, lack of institutional support, complex moral dilemmas, or the need to master various skills.

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2 This coincided with (long overdue) attention to research methodologies in the domain of human rights more generally (see McConnell and Smith 2018; Alston & Knuckey 2017; Andreassen et al. 2017; Coomans et al. 2009).

3 We use the term emancipatory research methods rather than activist research, which we see as only one form of working in an emancipatory way.

4 For a more critical view of how participation can become a new straightjacket imposing disproportionate burdens on various kinds of participants, see Hickey and Mohan (2004: 13).

One issue which has by-and-large been taken for granted, however, is that modalities of engagement are currently almost exclusively rooted in verbal interaction, in that they take spoken or written language, discursively expressed, as the primary way of transferring ideas and meaning-making. Human rights researchers rarely seek to move beyond an engagement strategy that takes verbal language as the only way of communicating and transferring ideas about justice, rights, resistance and identity. This makes sense because verbal linear language is often the most usable, familiar and easy-to-analyze format for researchers,<sup>5</sup> and from the point of view of the research subject, verbal storytelling can be ‘a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances’ (Jackson 2002: 15). As such, even groundbreaking, emancipatory and actor-oriented projects such as that of Pantazidou (2013: 284) continue to inscribe themselves in the idea that ‘rights talk’ (in this case defined as ‘reflexive expression’)<sup>6</sup> is the most appropriate way to work with vulnerable groups of displaced people to develop a legal consciousness. On the contrary, scholars who foreground the importance of ‘actual experience of something’ and of so-called *vivencia*, to truly apprehend the essence of a question, give few pointers as to how to examine this *vivencia* in practice (De Sousa Santos 2018: 4).

The question of how to capture people’s lived experience in ways that are not exclusively language-based becomes most obvious when working with vulnerable groups for whom the requirement of verbal expression and exchange may pose disproportionately high burdens to their visibility and inclusion. Interviews with individuals who may not be comfortable with verbal expression, for example, risk excluding these people from the conversation and affirming existing power relations.

Moreover, certain concepts or experiences may defy easy expression in verbal language, and may be better expressed in alternative ways. An example here is *Tejidos que lleva el alma* (‘weavings of the soul’), a truth-telling project organized by indigenous Guatemalan women who sought to defy the exclusive focus on verbal witness testimony of the formal Guatemalan truth commissions. These women participating in the Tejidos project organized their own truth-telling endeavour that relied, among many other modes of engagement, on weaving, embroidery and drawing to tell stories of harm, violence, resistance and recovery, in a more multi-dimensional, complex, non-linear and lived way, which defied easy verbal narrativization often required in formal truth commissions or other human rights bodies. Also in the Palestinian context, we observe that displaced people embroider as a form of non-verbal memorialization of complex collective trauma, for example through stitching embroidered maps of historical Palestine (Salamon 2016). These alternatives to verbal language as modes of engagement are particularly relevant when considering the complexity of making sense of extreme life events, and when working with vulnerable and displaced people from a variety of contexts. As Eastmond (2007: 260–1) argues,

forced migration presents special challenges to narrative research. Violence and displacement, as life-turning events, may ‘urge towards expression’ but also undermine the premises of

5 As Coomans et al (2009: 184) argue, the choice of method is usually determined, at least partly, by practical considerations such as information, financial resources, time that is available, and the qualifications of the researcher. This tends to make it difficult to imagine genuinely new approaches to research.

6 The term refers to Ife (2010) who differentiates between discursive definitions of rights, as deployed by public rights discourse, and reflexive definitions as articulated by rights-holders within their context and struggle.

narrativity, creating a sense of isolation and mistrust in those victimized. . . . Representing stories in ways that do narrators justice is not only a general problem of researchers' authority, but one which needs particular attention in relations to vulnerable categories of people.

Second, in the specific context of working with vulnerable people who have experienced or are experiencing trauma, engaging on the basis of verbal strategies is even more problematic because of the potential impact of (ongoing) trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder on unity of story and the ability to narrate a linear chronological order (Caruth 1996; LaCapra 2001; Laub 1995). Castillo-Cuellar (2013: 16) describes traumatic testimonies of people who lived through conflict as 'complex textures that wove time and space in a fashion that was not necessarily linear'. This freely moving nature of memories, he argues, defies the streamlined protocols, structures and categorizations that tend to characterize research methods rooted in verbal language. As such—individual or collective—traumatic experience entails a more complex, multi-directional and murky structure that may be hard to capture in verbal language, or within linear narrative imperatives. While we do not ground this article in trauma studies as such, trauma's interruption of linear narratives is important to acknowledge as it shows the need for a more multidimensional and responsive mode of engagement.<sup>7</sup>

Third, there is the more general epistemic challenge that verbal modes of engagement may be out of line with vernacular understandings of knowledge and ways of sharing that knowledge (Hinton 2018). As Banks (2018: 15) argues, 'not all societies would necessarily recognize the logical ordering of events that make a "good" story for Euro-Americans'. As such, verbal modes of engagement may fail to capture how people create meaning and fail to 'identify and valorize that which often does not even appear as knowledge in the light of the dominant epistemologies' (De Sousa Santos 2018: 2). These experiential epistemologies or artisanal and practical knowledges, as Santos calls them, have in common that 'they were not produced separately, as knowledge-practices separated from other social practices' (ibid.).

The challenge of verbal approaches to research then is that they might both fail to capture and to create forms of knowledge that are accessible to the participants themselves, and that they are insufficiently aware of 'what actually happens in practice' (Cornwall 2002).

Despite these challenges, very few studies have sought to challenge this over-reliance on verbal methods.<sup>8</sup> And despite the growing attention for emancipatory research and the commitment to listening to 'voices from below', human rights scholars have not paid sufficient attention to the question of *how* to listen to and capture these voices. But what if

7 Rush and Simic (2014) explore how artistic practices tend to be better equipped to deal with such a multi-directionality. Theatre, for example, can look simultaneously to the past, the present and the future because it can travel through temporal frames vertically or horizontally.

8 For an exception, see Clennon (2020) who uses participatory arts as a form of scholarly activism. Clennon's approach is different from what we propose below, however, in that she does not use arts as a means to better capture rights holders' sensitivities, but as a means to achieve a societal goal. In terms of capturing the understandings of her research participants, she uses, instead, classical analytical tools, such as interviews, questionnaires and classical data analysis software like SPSS. Her question is about how the strategic use of art translates into measurable social outcomes, while ours is about how it can foster a better understanding of the reality on the ground by shifting the epistemological baseline.

verbal ways of expressing themselves are not the first option, or even not an option at all, for the people we are working with? We need to urgently explore the potential of complementary ways of engaging that allow us to move beyond these verbal strategies, to shift epistemic baselines, and to understand in genuinely contextualized ways how people make sense of their rights and of justice. The failure to do this, risks overlooking a whole range of vernacular and practice-based knowledges that do not fit our current mode of engaging.

In the next section we first present the specific case of refugees from Syria living in the Shatila refugee camp, where we propose this mode of engagement. Subsequently, we lay out how our engagement strategy recasts how we engage (that is, in line with the lived experience of research participants) and where we look for answers to our research questions (that is, in embedded practice-based processes of meaning-making and knowledge generation). Only this way can we overcome current shortcomings within human rights research and capture both the content and the forms that are most relevant to the actors we work with.

### 3. Refugees from Syria living in Shatila

The methodological proposal we present in the next section is part of a broader research and artistic project on how the ongoing Syrian conflict and ensuing displacement altered artistic practices of artisans from Syria living in the Shatila refugee camp. Preliminary fieldwork was undertaken in spring 2020 in the Shatila refugee camp located in the south of Beirut. Based on this explorative fieldwork, we formulate a proposal offering a context-sensitive alternative to language-driven modes of engagement. While the article is not an in-depth case study of the relationship between artistic practices and human rights understandings, we nevertheless briefly introduce the living conditions of Syrian refugees in the camp to contextualize research participants' vulnerabilities, resourcefulness and agency, as well as how these inspired our proposal. We then zoom in on the artistic practice of embroidery as a nonlinear and context-sensitive form of narrativization of both harm and resistance.

#### 3.1 Vulnerabilities and agency of Syrian residents living in the Shatila refugee camp

Located in the Southern suburbs of Beirut, the Shatila refugee camp was founded by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1949, as a temporary settlement for approximately 3,000 Palestinians exiled following the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948 (Sharif 2018).<sup>9</sup> It was also the site of the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, during which at least 1,300 civilians, mostly Palestinians and Lebanese citizens, were killed by Christian militias with the support of the Israeli Defense Forces (Allan 2014). While the camp was originally mostly populated by Palestinians, it has seen the arrival of various marginalized groups in recent years. Today, the unofficial number of camp residents is 40,000, with the camp still covering roughly the same surface of one square km. The influx of about 20,000 people from Syria, following the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, explains most of this growth (Sharif 2018). As such, what was set up as a temporal settlement has gradually turned into an impoverished place with slum-like conditions hosting a

9 UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestinian refugees in the Near East, was created in the same year to support Palestinian refugees and protect their rights.



large number of displaced people of different origins. Protection under the law in the camp is virtually non-existent, as the camp does not fall under jurisdiction of the Lebanese government but is 'governed' by a popular committee containing different, predominantly Palestinian political factions (Allan 2014).

Displaced people from Syria living in Shatila, including Palestinians who were previously displaced to Syria, are a relatively new group of residents, with backgrounds that differ from other residents as many experienced abhorrent violence at the hands of the Syrian regime or other warring parties to the Syrian conflict. They often ended up in the camp due to its proximity to Syria or pre-existing relations. Although many people were welcomed at the start of the conflict, hostility towards refugees from Syria often became explicit as the number of people increased and the stay became protracted in a context where inadequate infrastructure and services (for example, education, health care, water, electricity) is coming under even more strain (UNHCR 2016). Unlike Palestinians, Syrians do not fall under the protection of the UNRWA but under the mandate of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This legal protection duality adds to tensions between new and established camp residents who perceive this duality as unjust (Sharif 2018).

On a wider scale, this influx of new residents has also led to increased tensions with the host population which contribute to the vulnerability of camp residents. Lebanon, which was already hosting the largest number of refugees per capita globally (UNHCR 2020), has been facing a severe financial and economic crisis, with sharp devaluation of the Lebanese pound, rising prices and increased unemployment (WFP 2020). Since October 2019, and even more since the explosions of August 2020, people have been taking to the streets. While the dominant messages of protesters have been anti-government, some seized the opportunity to cast the influx of people from Syria as a pressure on the already staggering economy and scapegoat them as a cause of the economic crisis and pressure on the national infrastructure (Al-Saadi 2020). Likewise, some politicians have also drawn on the influx of large numbers of residents to nourish a xenophobic rhetoric and change their policies regarding reception, encampment and integration (Içduygu and Nimer 2019). These policies have made the legal situation of Syrian refugees in Shatila even more precarious. The change in residence policy, for example, made it challenging to maintain legal status, which also limits refugees' access to health care, education, and employment, and makes them vulnerable to arbitrary detention or deportation (Human Rights Watch 2020: 355). At the same time, legal work opportunities have been restricted to three low-skilled sectors: agriculture, service jobs and construction (Chatelard 2017). COVID-related measures, in place since March 2020, have added to these vulnerabilities, notably by further hampering access to paid employment and health services, and stigmatizing displaced people from Syria (Al-Saadi 2020). Due to their reliance on precarious jobs and day-labour, often without a contract, access to formal employment has become a complete impossibility for some camp residents since the COVID-crisis (WFP 2020). These evolutions have made the informal sector including artisan work even more important, as we will discuss below.

At a micro-level, the lack of job-market access, economic pressure, overcrowded living facilities, and harsh living conditions results in increased tensions and vulnerabilities. Limited access to job opportunities, for example, has been shown to undermine traditional family roles and is considered to be a factor in increased domestic violence and other sexual gender-based violence (Syam et al. 2019). At the same time, these changing family- and gender-relations have—as in many other contexts of displacement—resulted in a situation

whereby women more frequently engage in income-generating work or take on roles outside the house.

One way in which they do this is through skilled practices, such as embroidery. Many of the women living in Shatila are skilled embroiderers. This embroidery has various functions, as we discuss below. What unites these functions is that they instill the embroiderer with a practice-based sense of agency.

### 3.2 The multiple meanings and functions of embroidery as a skilled practice

Embroidery is grounded in the rich textile tradition of the region (Vogelsang-Eastwood 2016). It can, moreover, be read as part of the revival of artistic practices following the protests of 2011 in Syria, documented by Halasa et al. (2014). Simultaneously, livelihood and income-generating projects employing embroidery have been set up in the Shatila refugee camp, which also gave embroidery greater prominence in the daily lives of women who master this skill. These initiatives were set up by local actors (for example, Basmeh wa Zeitoonah, the Shatila Studio, Ana Collection) and international organizations (for example, MADE51, Tight Knit Syria). This revival and livelihood projects led to a renewed attention for embroidery, both as a product and practice. Our exploratory fieldwork started from the embroidery practices in the context of these projects, and sought to examine what the practice of embroidery means for refugee artisans practicing their skill in this context of displacement.

It became clear that the meanings ascribed to embroidery were very diverse and had changed due to the conflict and following displacement. Even if women were embroidering in the context of a livelihood project leading to economic empowerment, the material and income-generating aspect of their skilled practice was not per se central. Instead, artisans attributed diverse functions to their embroidery, including making sense of the harm they suffered as well as resistance. Likewise, the creation process seemed to be at least as valuable for the artisans as the final product. In this section of the article, we focus on the various meanings and functions of embroidery as a skilled practice for Syrian women embroiderers living in Shatila, and notably its potential to foreground how people understand, experience and express their lived realities, including those of (in)justice.<sup>10</sup> Our intention in doing so is not to provide a comprehensive mapping thereof, but rather to present the background against which we developed our methodological proposal.

A first important function of embroidery in this context is that of acknowledging embroiderers as active, knowing and skilled agents (Ghnaim 2018). In a situation characterized by disempowerment and vulnerability, this acknowledgement is crucial. As Dedman (2016: 1) argues in her exhibition *Unravelled*, ‘paying attention to embroidery made by hand addresses the invisibility of craftswomen and men’. As we will argue below, approaching a research participant in this capacity of knower and maker, is also a promising avenue for emancipatory research.

This relates to a second function of the practice of embroidery, namely that it does not only give agency in a straightforward sense, but also offers embroiderers a way of expressing themselves through their skilled practice. As Wafa Ghnaim (2018: 14), herself an

<sup>10</sup> In the context of this project, we have worked exclusively with women, as de facto all the embroiderers were women. At the same time, this has proven particularly interesting, as several intersectional vulnerabilities are present in this group, which makes our proposal for a new mode of engagement even more relevant.

American-Palestinian embroiderer living in the diaspora, argues, for hundreds of years women shaped observations into patterns as an unwritten language transferring stories from one woman to another through needle and thread. Ghnaim (2018: 30) refers to embroidery as a way to resist 'the pressure to only articulate with words' and argues that, 'Our art is our language. Our embroidery is our dialect. Our dress is our book to be read. And to read this book is to decode our stories on fabric. To know this dialect is to hear our truth' (Ghnaim 2018: 84). One of the founders of Ana Collection echoed this sentiment when stating that with the embroidery, 'We wanted to remind people that these refugees are actual people with stories to tell'.<sup>11</sup> The expressive potential means that embroidery could shed light on the broader context of conflict and displacement regarding artisans' lived experiences. This function is important for our endeavour, as it foregrounds the role of this skilled practice in giving voice, documenting, memorializing loss, bearing witness, including how people experience (in)justice. Yet this expressive function of giving voice and telling stories can lead to tensions when it is combined with other functions such as income generation. The mission statement of Ana Collection, for example, declares that it aims to narrate stories of people whose voices are sidelined in war-torn Syria by embroidering these stories onto dolls in the camp (Ana Collection 2017). Yet, several research participants working with the Ana Collection lamented the limited attention for the actual telling of *their* stories through their embroidery: the 'Aleppo Dolls' tell the story of women living in Aleppo but not of the women who actually make the dolls. One of the research participants stated that 'We welcome the work, but we also have stories to tell'.<sup>12</sup> Possible tensions between the different functions of embroidery merit further research, as market pressure might, for example, shape the choice of patterns, colors, and stitches, and thus how lived experiences are represented and expressed. It might push women to make different choices when embroidering in different contexts.

Inherent in the logic of giving voice and telling one's story is the function of making meaning of, among other things, experiences of harm and injustice. The practice of embroidering was seen as a time and place when women sit together and share stories. As one research participant from Syria argued, 'We share emotions ... What we cannot say in our houses, we can say here',<sup>13</sup> or that embroidering together 'makes me feel more relaxed and forget what I have felt before'.<sup>14</sup> Another research participant indicated that her embroidering was a way to convert emotions and provide comfort because of the repetitive character of counting stitches in patterns. Also, the working space contributed to a shared and safe space where stories are shared. As one of the Syrian women stated: 'At home we have a mountain of problems. Here, it is more organized'.<sup>15</sup> This also points to the notion that embroidery and talk frequently happen together. Therefore, it is crucial to consider embroidery not as a stand-alone activity, but as obtaining its meaning through interaction with its context, including social relationships. This view is in line with what De Sousa Santos

11 Informal interview founder Ana Collection, BEI\_v\_012, 2020. The Ana collection, working with Syrian artisans from Shatila Studio, was established by a Syrian-Lebanese family as a social enterprise creating colorful embroidered 'Aleppo dolls', trying to combine the quest for voice and livelihood opportunities.

12 Focus group artisans, BEI\_v\_007.

13 Focus group artisans, BEI\_v\_007.

14 Informal interview artisans, BEI\_v\_004.

15 Informal interview artisans, BEI\_v\_005.

(2018: 16, *supra*) refers to as ‘ecologies of knowledges and an artisanship of practices’. As such, we argue that isolating embroidery as a practice of meaning-making would fail to capture its interwovenness with other functions and accompanying talk. Beyond a way to deal with traumatizing events, some research participants emphasized the role of embroidery as a site for making sense of trauma and injustice, especially for displaced people (also see Ghnaim 2018). Exploring the combination of techniques, patterns and colors, for example, revealed the extent to which these contained information about embroiderers’ life in Syria contrasting it with their life in Shatila. As one artisan illustrated,

In Syria, the embroidery was for the bedroom, for the rooms. It was simple embroidery. . . . Now it is different . . . Now, the embroidery is part of us. We put our whole life in the embroidery. It gets our memory back. We think about how life was and how it is now.<sup>16</sup>

This relates to the extent to which embroidery has become a factor both in expressing and in developing an (individual and collective) identity. Embroidery, as part of cultural heritage, can travel along with the bearer to other places. When being displaced, this kind of cultural heritage can provide a sense of continuity of identity and belonging in disruptive life courses (Chatelard 2017).<sup>17</sup> Also this function of identity formation is crucial from our point of view as it relates to the issue of individuals’ (self-)identification as rights-holders, and to the topic of resistance.

Based on our exploratory fieldwork, we found that embroidery can be a ‘platform’ for resistance to contest a particular narrative. Especially in a context of ongoing vulnerability, this function of embroidery is crucial because, as Cohen (2020: 6) demonstrates, artistic practices allow for expression through ‘metaphors and other symbols that carry multiple meanings’. In doing so, people ‘find ways to circumvent censors and express what might otherwise be inexpressible’. Agency, thus, can be found in embroidery offering a non-verbal language to, for example, give meaning or resist a particular narrative amid conflict. As Ghnaim (2018: 111) argues, when it is dangerous to speak out, ‘women began to speak in silence, through their embroidery’. During the first intifada (1987–93), for instance, Palestinian women embroidered nationalist symbols or iconic images on their clothes. Palestinian flags and the Al-Aqsa Mosque coloured the ‘intifada dresses’ as a form of resistance in everyday practice (Dedman 2018). Also in Syria ‘cities and small towns have been developing their own visual vocabulary of resistance’, using creativity not only as way of surviving the violence but also of challenging it (Halasa et al. 2014: vii, x). Hijazi (n.d.), a visual artist from Syria, joined the Syrian revolution in 2011 by making digital artworks to contest political and social oppression. In her work ‘dress’, she reflects on embroidery’s functions, including resistance, by making a digital print on fabric based on Levantine embroidery. The function of resistance is captured through embroidery’s capacity to preserve cultural heritage and memory (Atassi 2019).

Bendadi and Mohajerin (2019) take this resistance-function one step further by showcasing examples where Syrian and Palestinian-Syrian embroiderers explicitly wove rights narratives into their work. In their recent book ‘Textile as resistance’, they discuss the work of Samira Salah, a Palestinian refugee displaced from Syria, whose textile project in

16 Focus group artisans, BEI\_v\_007.

17 Also literature on Palestinian diaspora and displaced people documented this function: since the Nakba embroidery ‘became a way to represent the Palestinian collective identity and cultural perseverance’ for Palestinians (Ghnaim 2018: 29, Dedman 2018), including those in Shatila.

Lebanon seeks to protect the Palestinian embroidery against Israel's cultural appropriation. By approaching her embroidery as part of the Palestinian cultural heritage, Salah seeks to link this practice to the right to return to the homeland. Embroidery, she argues, implies this right because it links to the cultural heritage of the geographic region of Palestine. This resistance-function of embroidery has been documented in other contexts too. The 'arpillera-movement' in Chile, for example, is an instance where rightsholders preferred embroidery over verbal narratives to express human rights violations. Women used 'arpillera'-fabric to document the search for disappeared during the Pinochet dictatorship through embroidered patchwork. By embroidering their stories, women could circumvent censors from the regime. These visual stories of harm and violence became a testimony of human rights violations happening in Chile, nourishing the struggle for justice (Agosin and Winn 1996).

These functions show that embroidery has great potential regarding livelihoods, giving voice and agency, story-telling, documentation, meaning-making, identity formation, resistance including voicing rights concerns. While disentangling these various meanings was crucial for our project, the finding that embroidery, or other forms of artistic practice, can also constitute a basis for developing a new method of engagement in contexts of human rights research, was equally important for us. In the next section we highlight how these functions of embroidery, or other artistic practices, can be validated in emancipatory human rights research by engaging with rights-holders on their terms.

#### 4. Towards new ways of engaging with research participants: performative ethnography through collaborative making<sup>18</sup>

As an artistic and skilled practice, embroidery, has multiple and often combined functions, which all acknowledge embroiderers as active, knowing and skilled agents. Linking this to the question of how to engage with research participants in ways that are truly empowering and that start from their experiences and vernacular modes of expression (which might be non-linear and non-verbal), we argue that performative ethnography through collaborative making is a promising way of engaging in a 'conversation' about justice. Performative ethnography is concerned with how people perceive, create, and transform their environment through everyday activities (Fabian 1990).<sup>19</sup>

Starting a conversation through and about a skilled and artistic practice with which research participants are intimately familiar and for which they can take on the role of knowers is in line with de Sousa Santos's (2018: 2) argument for integrating practical and vernacular knowledges produced within a specific context. A performative ethnography through collaborative making (embroidery in this case), moreover explicitly starts from the skills, agency and expertise of the research participants, over the pre-existing skills of the researcher—even if doing so may pull the researcher out of their comfort zone, which can be a first step towards mitigating power relations. In our case, we started to explore a dynamic

18 In the article 'Exploring the Position of Designer-Researcher within Design Anthropology' of Verclyte and Willems (paper in file with the authors), reflections on this methodology are framed from the perspective of design anthropology with a specific focus on the materiality of skilled practice.

19 Fabian developed the technique of performative ethnography when studying theatre in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where he found that certain concepts could not be understood or expressed through verbal linear language.

method of interventions rooted in learning (or finetuning) embroidery from and together with the research participants.

These interventions began during explorative fieldwork in spring 2020, where five conversations started by exchanging knowledge about embroidery with fourteen women from Syria living in Shatila. The second author has a background in fashion design and is skilled in various relevant techniques. As such, a common interest in skill generated trust, credibility, and dialogue among makers. It became clear that jointly embroidering, as a (vernacular) nonverbal narrative could offer a lot of potential, also within human rights research. Sitting down with embroiderers in Shatila to learn new stitches, patterns, and techniques from them, to work with the materials they work and understand the techniques and their use allows for a dynamic interaction between makers, carefully shaped stitch after stitch, thread by thread. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic postponed more extended fieldwork in Shatila. Nevertheless, we continued our conversation online, often through (visual) discussions leading to, for example, a digital embroidery session in autumn 2020 with one of the women (Verclyte and Willems 2021).

Although collaborative making is still limited in this early phase of the research, we experienced that this allowed for practical and multi-layered ways of observing and interacting, that were not pinned on classical narrative and discursive approaches. Instead, they start from a performative logic, from the lived realities and agency of rightsholders, and acknowledge them as active (meaning-)makers. As such, we found that the practice of embroidery offers interesting opportunities for emancipatory research as it turns the tables of who holds the knowledge.

Starting from this position, we found that approaching research participants based on their skilled practice soon resulted in interactions that were about more than the tacit materiality. They turned to conversations that could be read in terms of how people understand their rights in practice. These understandings of rights were not per se in line with formally validated rights claims, but shed light on actors' interpretation of conflict and displacement including multiple and diverse understandings of human rights. As such, we argue that these everyday practices can also be seen as a site where narratives about justice and even about human rights emerge and take shape.

This argument differs from the previous one: on one hand, we argue that artistic practices are a promising site of human rights research because of the emancipatory potential of engaging with research participants based on their strengths and knowledge. On the other, we argue that they are interesting sites for human rights research, because they may—and quite often—do contain and express views about justice and rights. Regarding the second dimension, however, we argue that it is not sufficient to study these skilled practices based on mainstream approaches rooted in verbal language: if and when we want to understand the vernacular narratives and knowledge that is expressed in the artistic practices of rightsholders, we need engagement methods that take these practices, including the context within which they are practiced, as a baseline and that do not (exclusively) rely on the spoken and written word.

For these reasons, we argue that a performative ethnography based on collaborative making offers a potentially more emancipatory and more context-sensitive mode of engaging with research participants that fully acknowledges them as (meaning-)makers. Only then can we include people in the conversation whose voices are sidelined when relying solely on modes of engagement that are rooted in linear and verbal language. This allows for alternative ways of knowing and knowledge-generation that consider how people make

sense of experiences through everyday practices. It is in line with objectives of actor-oriented approaches and vernacularization studies, as well as with emancipatory and participatory research methods.

#### 4.1 Opportunities and challenges of a performative ethnography

Engagement based on people's pre-existing skills and foraging for new ways to understand voice and agency holds various advantages, including epistemological, ethical and emancipatory ones.

The epistemological advantage of a performative ethnography through collaborative making becomes apparent when considering the premise that not all knowledge can be acquired or expressed through discursive statements. Some knowledge can only be generated and expressed through 'action, enactment or performance' (Fabian 1990: 6). This means that any mode of engagement that falls short of this performative or praxis-based component, is unlikely to offer a comprehensive understanding of people's lived realities—to the extent that this is ever possible. Yet, engaging based on a performative ethnography through collaborative making takes PAR principles one step further by foregrounding those skilled practices of research participants that might be overshadowed when adopting an exclusively language-based approach, rather than 'knowing by doing' (Willems 2013: 477). In line with PAR, our proposal thus allows us to move from 'knowing about' towards seeing knowledge generation as a joint and dynamic process shaped by other social practices. Fabian (1990: 11–12) argues that performance is literally 'giving form to' lived experiences through dialogue between researcher and interlocutors. Performance is creating and making which is not based on 'a pre-existing script' (Fabian 1990: 13), in this case, employing needle and thread.

Beyond this epistemological advantage, there are ethical advantages to doing human rights research based on performative ethnography. It equalizes the relation between various research participants in ways that might be difficult to achieve when engaging solely in verbal language. Even when adopting PAR methods, asymmetrical power relations remain a risk when one party is more comfortable using linear verbal language. This is particularly relevant to consider when working with vulnerable populations, and even more so when working with research participants who have sometimes experienced years of brutal attacks on their attempts to verbalize certain ideas. This is the case of many refugees from Syria living in Shatila who, for much of their lives, faced a restrictive discursive environment in which the regime established guidelines for public speech and used the threat of violence to force its citizen into silence (Wedeen 1999: 20). This longstanding experience of imposed and oppressive silencing challenges the effectiveness of engagement that assumes that people will easily talk about their experiences of injustice, their justice aspirations or their self-identification as rights-bearers (Herremans and Destrooper 2021). In our case, we noticed that approaching research participants based on their skilled practice and making this the centrepiece of our intervention, allowed for a more equal negotiating position, counteracted some forms of privilege of the researcher and started from a common interest—rather than from our interest in rights talk. The aim is not for the researcher to be an eternal apprentice, but rather to start from a unique position with related but different skills (Gatt and Ingold 2013: 154) regarding a process about (meaning-)making and expression.

This further underlines the emancipatory potential of our proposal. Whether or not the researcher and research participants are working on a project for social change (as is often the case in action research), we argue that a performative ethnography rooted in

collaborative making shifts the parameters of the interaction to such an extent that the research intervention is infused with an emancipatory potential. In our own work, by focusing on embroidery, we found a more vernacular way to be exposed to and hear people's stories, including those about (in)justice and rights violations. The means putting the onus of finding a mutual language on the shoulders of the researcher, rather than expecting the research participants to express themselves in ways understandable to the researcher, which again has the potential to mitigate power relations.

Simultaneously, there are challenges to this mode of engagement, not least those related to sharing insights gained through this kind of approach with a broader audience who is neither on site, nor necessarily familiar with the skilled practice under consideration. With most mainstream scholarly, policy, and practical forums adopting a linear and verbal format, the researcher needs to overcome the challenge of rendering the insights gained based on this practical mode of engagement in a more broadly understandable narrative. As [Cohen \(2020: 12\)](#) asks, 'Through what channels and in what spaces can the hard-won knowledge generated within the arts, culture and conflict transformation ecosystem about how to earn trust and collaborate across differences in language, culture and worldview be made more broadly available?' Given the ongoing nature of our research, we cannot definitively answer this question that requires further research. At the same time, we have found the collaboration across disciplines (notably with the arts) particularly inspiring in thinking about alternative modes of engagement and dissemination.

This points to a second challenge, namely the need to navigate various disciplines, not commonly found within one researcher (or even a research group). As [Boeykens \(2019\)](#) argues, this kind of research requires cross-fertilization between various academic and communities practices, disciplines and debates. It also requires (a willingness to develop) very different skills sets. Few human rights researchers have so far grounded artistic expressions or crafts like embroidery as a foundation of their scholarly work or research project. In our case, being skilled with needle and thread or having a basic understanding of the material's characteristics, created a common ground and credibility that eased the interaction. This underlines the usefulness of more collaboration with (not just interest in) the arts on the side of human rights researchers.

A last challenge, which is increasingly important to consider in times when the possibility of global travel and physical proximity are uncertain, is the requirement to be physically present and spend long stretches of time with research participants. In our case, both the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the political turmoil in Lebanon challenged our possibilities to be physically present in the camp and to co-create. However, even in different circumstances the challenges posed by this time-consuming manner of engaging have been amply documented by scholars engaging in other forms of ethnographic work in volatile contexts. In our case, we responded to this challenge by seeking to develop a hybrid strategy of digital and actual presence in the field, to avoid losing access to those actors most often erased from hegemonic narratives. Learning the language of embroidery requires observation, repetition, and rehearsal in the form of mentorship. We have been able to engage in initial fieldwork on the ground to build trust and establish initial contacts, so that part of the process can be carried forward remotely and in hybrid forms. In practice, we continued collaboration through digital and often visual conversations leading an online embroidery workshop with women living in Shatila. Despite obvious limitations such as context-sensitivity, these experiments offer the advantage of being able to engage more long-term with research participants and also to stay in touch with them when not having access to



the field. Additionally, the second author has experimented with art-based practices to presence embroiderers' voices in an ongoing manner together with a woman who grew up in Shatila. Simultaneously, this artistic endeavor visualizes how these conversations and interactions shape the methodology and research process.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Our exploratory fieldwork with Syrian artisans living in the Shatila refugee camps demonstrated the shortcomings of engagement strategies that rely (exclusively) on the spoken or written word. Many of our research participants have experienced oppressive silencing in Syria and continue to find themselves in situations of precarity and vulnerability in the Shatila refugee camp. It soon became clear that expecting people to talk about how they understood certain rights, like cultural heritage rights, through interviews or focus groups was ill-fitted to their realities. This led us to rethink our mode of engagement early on. We started from the premise that knowledge (including the understanding of rights) is generated through, and cannot be separated from, other social practices. Therefore, experiential epistemologies that foreground practical and vernacular knowledge constituted a promising starting point for human rights research.

Taking this view as a starting point, we sought to develop a more practice-driven mode of engagement that would allow us to understand experiences of injustice and justice aspirations in a more context-sensitive way, starting from research participants' own skills, agency and lived reality. We found such a mode of engagement in a performative ethnography of collaborative making. We worked with embroiderers because of the long tradition of embroidery in the region and its multiple functions, from income-generation to giving voice, documenting, meaning-making, identity-formation, and resistance. We argue that a performative ethnography based on collaborative making has epistemic, ethical, and emancipatory benefits but also poses several challenges, notably in terms of sharing insights. The article is, therefore, not a plea for seeing performative ethnography as a panacea for every research project focusing on people's lived realities. It is, instead, an illustration of how moving from exclusively word-driven modes of engagement to modes of engagement that are, also, practice-driven can be more in line with some of the objectives emancipatory and participatory methodologies set themselves. In a more general sense, it is also in line with critical scholarship that foregrounds experiential epistemologies, in that this practice-driven mode of engagement foregrounds *vivencia* and may, as such, shed a different light on how people make sense of questions related to justice and their rights.

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