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Digital Storytelling And Visual Representations: Refugees Disrupt Stereotypical Narratives

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VERA ECCARIUS-KELLY

ALISON SCHAEFFING

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

ABSTRACT

This community-engaged participatory action project aims to disrupt stereotypes about refugees by defying existing power dynamics through the use of photographic expressions paired with socio-cultural and political narratives. Refugee participants and a team of researchers co-created a series of unexpected digital narratives that centered individual refugees as the main visual storytellers in their inner city West Hill neighborhood in Albany, New York. The project created space to question commonly held beliefs that deny agency and/or voice to resettled refugees. The participants produced human-centered digital story fragments that incorporated words of resistance, defiance and clarification. This collaboration contributes to a more complex understanding of the dynamics that shape social cohesion in diverse neighborhoods, including in areas with high concentrations of resettled refugees.

CORRESPONDING AUTHORS:

Vera Eccarius-Kelly
Siena College, US
veccarius-kelly@siena.edu

Alison Schaeffing
Russell Sage College, US
schaea@sage.edu

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THE SETTING: CO-CREATIONS IN WEST HILL

Frequently depicted as masses of people in need of international intervention or rescue, individual refugees are rarely in control of how they are visually portrayed or the ways in which their journeys to resettlement are narrated (von Hall, 2018). In contrast, this community-engaged participatory action project created space to disrupt such stereotypes about refugees by defying existing power dynamics through the use of visual representations including photographic and artistic expressions (Bleiker et al., 2013). Refugee participants and a team of diverse researchers co-created a series of unexpected digital narratives that centered individual refugees as the main visual storytellers in their Albany, New York, neighborhood. As a digital storytelling project (Alexander, 2017), its aim was to create the space to disrupt commonly held beliefs about refugees, which deny agency and/or voice. The team members and resettled refugee participants in this community-engaged project produced human-centered visual story fragments that incorporated words of resistance, defiance, and clarification. This collaboration contributes to a more complex understanding of the dynamics that shape social cohesion efforts in diverse neighborhoods, which include resettled refugees.

A research team, consisting of two faculty and 12 undergraduate and graduate student members, launched this multi-year Refugee Voice and Community Museum project in the West Hill neighborhood of Albany during May 2020. The team included student members who were resettled refugees and immigrants as well as US-born participants, and ranged in age from 18–28. The project was in part funded by Siena College's Center for Academic Community Engagement and Russell Sage College's Office of Service Learning and Community Engagement.

Team members collaborated with the Refugee Welcome Corporation (RWC), a small 501(c) (3) non-profit organization situated in the West Hill neighborhood of Albany, and colloquially known as the Refugee Welcome Center. A central aspect of this project was to create both the physical space and the imaginary freedom for resettled refugees to explore and examine the ways in which they had been portrayed and understood in their neighborhood and beyond. In planning this community-engaged project, the team pursued intersectional theories grounded in critical refugee studies and participatory action research to inform all methodological and practical approaches. As a multifaceted neighborhood project, resettled refugees guided and informed various ideas and action plans, so that the team could jointly produce surprisingly creative ways of centering individual refugees and their personal narratives. Although initial plans included identifying a physical museum space for resettled refugees to curate a community exhibit, COVID-19 public health concerns reduced possibilities for in-person interactions. All aspects related to physical and group-based components had to be reimagined.

THE TIME: A MOMENT WITHIN A MOVEMENT

Once the project was launched, three significant and intersecting contexts unfolded simultaneously: the community (and the world) was navigating the COVID-19 pandemic; the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was experiencing growing momentum; and the nation was approaching a contentious presidential election. In particular, the challenges associated with COVID-19 and the increasing visibility of the BLM movement significantly reshaped the original plans for this community project. Locally important marches and significant civil unrest took place in the same geographic area as our project, which further sharpened some of the participants' ideas for the digital photo and storytelling series.

As reflexive researchers involved in participatory action research, it was essential to respond to changes in the community members' lives and priorities, and continually practice flexibility in the selected methods. The team followed Kindon et al. (2008, p. 90) in approaching participatory action research "by, with, and for people affected by a particular problem, which takes place in collaboration with academic researchers." By seeking to democratize the production of knowledge and creating opportunities for typically marginalized voices to inform progressive change, participants informed every step of this project. In this way, participatory action methods provided a collaborative framework for meaningful research to persevere through challenging circumstances and contexts. As McTaggart's (1991) methodological discussions implied, such approaches allow researchers to participate *with* people in a collective effort to improve and understand the complicated world around them by actively working to change it.

In June 2020, COVID-19 had become an ever-growing crisis, and the team and community partners collectively decided to abandon the design of a physical exhibit, and instead created space for digital storytelling approaches. The use of digital platforms invited the integration of creative socio-political activism by both refugees and team participants, who became increasingly captivated by blending themes related to equity, active citizenship, and anti-racism work. Conversations about digital storytelling intersected quite naturally with demands articulated through BLM marches and decolonization activities in public spaces. A commitment to local civic engagement further informed the visual narratives created by team members and resettled refugee participants. Everyone worked collaboratively to produce a framework for a

more transformative and sustainable exchange between resettled refugees and local community members.

By pursuing this innovative and community-engaged initiative, the team successfully created space for complex conversations and discussions related to intersectional social justice approaches during the summer and fall 2020. The project remained active through the 2020–2021 school year, and resumed full-time during the summer of 2021. Winter 2020–2021 projects focused on collaboration with additional community partners, and included a Black History Month youth art exhibit featured in Albany City Hall; art workshops delivered via Zoom; and culturally-appropriate public health messaging related to the COVID-19 pandemic and access to vaccinations. Fall 2021 projects focused on developing classes for adult English language learners, and offered women's health consultations and specialty clinics. These smaller-scale projects proved vital to strengthening relationships with community members by continually responding to changing interests and needs. In addition, such projects supported planning for effective full-time engagement and advanced the larger project's goals towards creating ever-expanding opportunities for self-expression by resettled refugees and other members of the community.

THE LOCATION: SITUATING THE REFUGEE WELCOME CENTER (RWC) IN WEST HILL

This project and its methods are deliberately place-based, centering the work within a specific area in the West Hill neighborhood of Albany. This neighborhood is considered a racially and ethnically concentrated area of poverty according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).[1] West Hill fits a profile that HUD characterizes has having (1) a family poverty rate that is greater than or equal to 40 percent of residents and where (2) the non-white population is greater than 50 percent. West Hill is a largely African-American neighborhood (69%), where a minority of white residents (15.9%) and an even smaller percentage of Hispanic (9.8%) and Asian residents (1.9%) make up the community.[2] West Hill, of course, is not the only neighborhood in the city of Albany that falls within these HUD parameters. The South End, Arbor Hill, and the Second Avenue neighborhoods are additional areas where race and ethnicity intersect with socio-economic marginalization. What stands out about West Hill is that one specific section of the neighborhood along Elk Street has become the focused area of reinvestment for the unique work of the RWC.

As a nonprofit, the RWC seeks to rehabilitate and revitalize the neighborhood's abandoned and vacant buildings, and intervenes as a responsible property manager to increase the availability of safe and affordable housing to resettled refugees. Over the past 8 years, the RWC directly acquired or signed leasing agreements for more than 30 residential units across 20 buildings, which provide access to housing for more than 130 resettled refugees. In 2017, the RWC also purchased and refurbished a commercial building that now serves as "the Center," a community space that provides support services, resources, and education. Since the RWC's refurbished housing opportunities are within a short walk of the Center, outreach activities are place-based and participatory.

This small nonprofit aims to help refugees resettle by focusing on rebuilding lives in a diverse urban area. Over the past several years, the RWC created a supportive neighborhood of resettled refugees intermixed with an already diverse community. No other community in Albany is defined by a similarly dense housing arrangement for refugee families within a racially and ethnically concentrated area of poverty. RWC supported apartments available for rent to refugees are on average 15% below market value. Similar to many American cities, Albany suffers from a lack of affordable and quality low-income housing, and the RWC has intervened in the neighborhood to bridge this gap. However, no such access to more affordable high quality housing and responsible property management exists in the area for non-refugee families, which intensifies communal tensions. It creates a sense that resettled refugee families may have access to opportunities that are denied to other families in the same neighborhood. This acknowledgement and possibility is fundamental to the team's theoretical and methodological engagement, which centers on intersectional approaches to community activism. This discussion has also contributed to the RWC's continued and deliberate efforts to expand support to non-refugee community members in practical ways.

It is noteworthy that 15% of the statistically captured residents of West Hill were born outside of the U.S. and arrived as refugees from numerous countries. Some 66.7% of the households in West Hill are led by single women/mothers, which makes them particularly vulnerable to socio-economic exclusion and marginalization (such as lack of social and financial support structures, mental health challenges, trauma, etc.). A high percentage of the resettled refugee families are among the households that are led by women since their husbands and/or male relatives were 'disappeared' and murdered in their regions of origin. Access to affordable and safe housing therefore is a particularly sensitive issue throughout the neighborhood. In 2020/2021, renters seeking a one to two bedroom apartment paid about $1,000 per month in West Hill. A mere 15 minute walk outside of West Hill, property owners can demand twice as much for a similarly sized apartment. This extreme discrepancy is highlighted in a National Public Radio story (Fessler, 2019), citing data that demonstrate opportunity

gaps along racial lines in Albany as among the worst in the nation. Two predominantly black and brown neighborhoods, Arbor Hill and West Hill, are counted in the lowest-opportunity neighborhoods in the entire country, while predominantly white neighborhoods, such as Buckingham Lake in Albany, are among the highest opportunity areas (Fessler, 2019).

The city of Albany—and more broadly the so-called Greater Capital District Region, which includes counties in the cities of Albany, Schenectady and Troy—has been a popular resettlement location for newly arriving refugees over the past decade (Moench & Crowley, 2018; Moench 2019). The region is attractive due to its lower cost of living and existing support structures within governmental agencies and nonprofits. Over the past decade, upstate New York experienced a significant population decline, which led to an understanding that resettled refugees could help slow if not reverse this trend. Resettled refugees have added to the local workforce and engaged in economic activities that supported revitalizing efforts in local communities by starting small businesses such as groceries and restaurants (McKinley, 2017). In total, about 5,000 refugees were resettled in the Albany area since 2005, but under the Trump administration refugee resettlement efforts were drastically curtailed in 2020 (Bump, 2019). However, the area is experiencing a significant influx of resettled refugees under the Biden administration, and this team and the RWC are well positioned for continued engagement with a widening scope of participation. For example, this project is partnering with the Albany High School Newcomer Academy in 2021, which provides programming to newly arriving young adults who will be entering the public school system.

Among the resettled refugees in the West Hill neighborhood are members of a range of ethnic, religious, and racial communities, which have been dominated by recent arrivals from Afghanistan (ethnic Hazara, Tajik and Pashtun). Additionally Syrian, Iraqi, and Yemeni families reside in the area (ethnic Arab and Kurdish), as well as various groups from the Democratic Republic of Congo, members of Banyamulenge communities from Burundi (a stateless people), Burmese populations, and undocumented Spanish speakers (Guatemalans, Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Ecuadorans). It would be a mischaracterization to assert that many of the adults among the resettled refugees frequently interact with their neighbors across religious, ethnic, and racial boundaries. That also holds true for interactions between resettled refugees and other residents of the neighborhood, who are predominantly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color). Distancing behaviors and separation along racial, ethnic, and religious lines is less obvious among younger teenagers and children, who routinely speak with each other on the streets or play together in West Hill (at least during the summer months and prior to the height of COVID-19 infections).

THE SPACE: POSITIONING THE PROJECT IN THE REFUGEE WELCOME CENTER (RWC)

The RWC can be found in a nondescript, single-level commercial space that serves as an informational hub for local residents who settle in the area and continue to utilize various kinds of support to manage daily life. Next to the RWC is the *All The Way Up Deli*, which offers inexpensive sandwiches and snacks, sells cigarettes and alcohol, and welcomes payment through EBTs (Electronic Benefits Transfers, a federal food stamp program). A little further down the block, local residents can purchase fast food at *Albany Halal Grill*. As a public space, the RWC is predominantly utilized by members of the refugee community and its various volunteers. Other local residents only occasionally enter the building or interact with volunteers outside the Center. During summer and fall 2020, predominantly white volunteers distributed donated fresh foods, seasonal clothing, and school or art supplies to West Hill community members. Discussions among community activists, volunteers, and staff increased the sense that a higher percentage of all donations needed to be shared with non-refugee community members under growing socio-economic duress related to COVID-19.

Prior to the pandemic outbreak, the RWC offered intensive English language classes, provided student homework support, engaged in social activities such as potluck and recipe swaps, and started an urban community garden project on vacant green lots. To supplement the ongoing support from adult volunteers, additional programming over the past two years was developed and delivered as a partnership with local college faculty. In this stage of growth for a small grassroots low-budget nonprofit, service learning courses were designed to develop and deliver RWC programming, while simultaneously providing experiential learning opportunities for local college students. For example, a “Food, Culture, and Nutrition” course worked with the RWC community members to assess the availability and affordability of culturally-appropriate and fresh foods. Members of the community participated in the community garden program and co-hosted community-chef cooking lessons and cultural exchanges. More recently, a local black community activist offered art classes and encouraged children from all interested neighborhood families to partake. During summer 2020, the RWC served as an information center to support local census activities. But when the health department expanded social distancing rules related to COVID-19, the RWC’s communal activities shrunk down to a bare minimum and volunteers stopped offering classes right at the time of this project’s initiation. While the RWC re-opened with limited programming offerings such as youth art classes, homework help, and adult paperwork assistance, many programs were held at least partially online.

This limited profile of the West Hill neighborhood pointed to the fundamental need for intersectional approaches to community activism. While the RWC's mission was focused on serving the needs of resettled refugees, the community-engaged team quickly realized that integrating a more systematic and cross-sectional approach to collaboration could promote movement towards more holistic neighborhood cohesion. All interested local families in the immediate project area of Elk and Ontario Streets had to be considered. For example, a portion of all fresh foods donated to the RWC needed to be made explicitly available to non-refugee BIPOC neighbors. As the team approached increasingly public-facing activities that corresponded to the expansion of post-COVID plans, a focus on collaboration with other West Hill nonprofits allowed for a wider scope of programming and inclusion across the multiethnic and multiracial neighborhood.

THE INTERSECTION: METHOD AND PRAXIS

"We used to be people, but now we carry the label of refugee," Bassam, 28, stated as he talked about plans for a community exhibit to be curated in the neighborhood (Eccarius-Kelly, 2020). While Bassam reflected on what could be included in such an exhibit, he fell silent for a moment. Bassam mentioned that "someone like me is not expected to have lived a life before coming here; we are seen as broken people because of our experiences and we are holding our hands open [for assistance or donations]." Bassam's observations can be confirmed by examining common patterns in published materials about refugees. Both in the scholarly literature as well as in journalistic and popular writing, refugees are frequently portrayed as defenseless or vulnerable victims of violence without agency (von Hall, 2018). Throughout the Cold War, and more recently during the everlasting conflicts that shape the lived experiences of communities in Central Africa, as in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, scholars in the social sciences and humanities regularly framed refugees as benefiting from direct international interventions. In particular, western generosity has been portrayed as a response to general failings or shortcomings by other countries (in particular in the Global South as in the Middle East, Asia, or Africa) during periods of extreme humanitarian distress.

Such patterns often result in particular public imaginaries about refugees as human caravans or waves of misery. Denied any control over narratives that depict them, refugees have been photographed, filmed and added to statistical data sets by displaying them as housed in makeshift encampments, patiently awaiting international intervention. The field of Critical Refugee Studies rejects such decontextualized and de-historicized practices that position refugees as mere objects of profound suffering and in need of international rescue (Nguyễn, 2017; Espiritu, 2017). Rarely are refugees given the opportunity to exert control over their own stories and to push back against limiting representations. Yet when refugees advance alternative experiences or more personal narratives that defy omissions or lasting silences in the public's imagination, they simultaneously engage in practices of decolonizing representations about themselves. In consideration of this particular context, the members of the research team and the West Hill refugee participants selected critical theories and digital storytelling methods to ensure that they converged in a continually reflexive approach that shaped all activities and outcomes (Baxter, 2017).

Once refugees resettle, new challenges control their stories and continue to obscure their narratives. Myopic portrayals of resettled refugees can be damaging when they define particular groups as mere passive beneficiaries of state benevolence, while other groups can become defined as racially or religiously problematic, unruly, or even dangerous (Banks, 2012). Deeply inaccurate, such accounts contribute to the characterization of resettled refugees as requiring public scrutiny or presenting them as a financial burden on local communities. Occasionally, sinister remarks link the arrival of refugees to criminality or conjure up origin-related national security issues. Local residents, as a consequence, can raise potentially hostile questions regarding the practice of refugee resettlement by inquiring about larger risks to safety in their neighborhoods. Given the previously discussed context of West Hill, a critical and intersectional theoretical approach to the team's engagement with the community was fundamental.

THE VIRTUAL DIMENSION: SOCIAL MEDIA "FOR US, BY US"

In recognition of harmful narratives and distorted public discourses, the team initiated early conversations about countering perceptions related to refugees in the city of Albany. These general conversations about a museum exhibit to be curated by local community members generated consternation among resettled refugees. Some potential participants discussed what items should be displayed, while others wondered who would visit a communal exhibit from outside of their own neighborhood. But within a week of brainstorming, a range of engaging ideas emerged and the museum exhibit incorporated plans for live musical performances by a group of young Hazara Afghans. Community members also envisioned a refugee children's art show and a potential display of maps to indicate where various ethnic Pashtun, Arab and Kurdish refugees and Central African families including

Banyamulenge members originated from. A few days later, a group of neighborhood women proposed to make dishes from their regions of origin because they believed that community celebrations should include food for visitors.

It was mostly young adult community members who embraced plans related to diverse artistic expressions at the outset since they were familiar with various modes of creativity such as video installations and photography. Through conversations with their relatives, the exhibit concept was introduced into various households, which then led to communal conversations about how to create a festive and celebratory event. When COVID-19 was beginning to take a toll, alternative ideas and options emerged surprisingly quickly. Within a week, the team and participating refugees devised a plan that would rely on social media platforms to engage community participation through a process that focused on digital storytelling techniques. Refugee participants and team members also agreed that photos could be part of physical exhibits in a post-COVID environment. Generally considered a contemporary narrative research methodology (Kobayashi, 2012; Meadows, 2003), digital storytelling invites personally narrated accounts that are linked to images, photos, and video fragments. The narratives often integrate extremely short collections of visual information to enhance or accompany sound data or oral accounts. As a methodology, digital storytelling offers a number of opportunities for creative self-expression by centering the voice or image of a marginalized storyteller in society (Lenette, 2019). Digital storytelling techniques are considered a highly valuable and ethical approach to collaborating with refugees since both images and interlinked texts challenge and question commonly advanced stereotypes (McDonough & Colucci, 2019; Alexandra, 2015; Yüksel, Robin & McNeil, 2011).

In West Hill, the team centered resettled refugees in a photo series in which individual participants decided to wear particular clothing items in unexpected contexts or combinations. In addition, participants had the option to add social criticism or to discuss the underlying meanings they wanted to articulate in conjunction with a particular image. In collaboration with the team, participants titled the series "For Us, By Us" and proposed to create larger collaborative dialogues through digital storytelling efforts. Such a methodological approach can highlight socio-political or cultural issues that are frequently experienced by marginalized or silenced individuals such as refugees. By visually documenting particular emotions and images, digital storytelling participants construct narratives that counter common perceptions or serve as tools for self-advocacy.

Asylum-seeking team member Balqees Sayed (see ***Figure 1***) vigorously objected to the notion of appropriating jewelry or hand-stitched tribal dresses from Kuchi (also Kochi) nomadic peoples in Afghanistan. Balqees noted that Kuchi clothing items and jewelry designs are often copied in the West and then sold under the label of "boho" fashion. She expressed deep frustration with such acts of appropriation and considered these transgressions as cultural theft because they lack an acknowledgement of the original designs created by Kuchi women. Balqees bemoaned that there was no respect or appreciation for the skills of these Pashto-speaking tribal women who made the jewelry and clothing and what these items represent in terms of communal memories, heritage, and lived experiences.

A commonly held stereotype about Muslim women refugees is that they are deeply repressed by male family members, and that Pashto-speaking women in particular lack agency and are required to wear a black abaya with niqab (full face covering), or a burqa. But by wearing colorful dresses and jewelry made by women in her ethnic community, Balqees disrupts commonly used and essentializing narratives about Muslim women. She challenges perceptions about Afghan refugees in particular (see ***Figure 2***).

Balqees shared that "I love wearing my Afghani Kamees. For me, this is an opportunity to show another part of who I am. I am not just a girl from a developing country. I am not oppressed. I am not controlled by men. This is a vintage dress worn by Kuchi women. My ancestors were nomads. These dresses are perfect for colder weather during the summer month in my country. The one I'm wearing is very loose and has a huge pocket where you can store many things. And this is all handmade. When I bought it, my mom sewed some torn parts of this dress. This is more than just a dress. This is a part of who I am. This is the beauty of my culture. This is what the media fails to see. We are humans. We have cultures. We have insights. We are smart. This is an Afghani Kamees, to all the white people out there appropriating our culture; it is not a 'Boho' dress. This is a handmade Kochani Kamees."

Jeanne Sinzinkayo, also a resettled refugee team member, is a digital storyteller and human rights activist (see ***Figure 3***). She arrived in the city of Albany as a child after she survived a genocidal attack against her Banyamulenge community in 2004. Despite Jeanne's young age at the time, she vividly recalls the sounds and smells of the murderous assault on her family at the Gatumba Refugee Camp in Burundi. Today, Jeanne is focused on the Banyamulenge struggle for international recognition and is a case worker at USCRI (The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants). She pursues her goal of curating a collection of digital information about her community and serves as a record keeper for unheard Banyamulenge voices (at least 152 community members were murdered and more than 100 severely injured in the vicious attacks). Jeanne recommends that everyone read her cousin Sandra's book to better understand the horrors of the Gatumba massacre and

Figure 1 Balqees Sayed is in a green Kuchi dress and traditional head jewelry outside of the RWC. Proud of her Afghani Kuchi heritage, she makes her own decisions about dress, style, and appearance.

Figure 2 Balqees Sayed is wearing red Kochani Kamees and traditional Kuchi jewelry.

Figure 3 Jeanne Sinzinkayo is wearing a patterned dress called an ibubu.

the larger challenges her community continues to face (Uwiringiyimana, 2017).

Jeanne explains that "an ibubu is commonly worn by older women in the Banyamulenge community. It is loose and gives you room to move around. It is typically worn with a headpiece because older women from the Banyamulenge community cover their heads as a sign of respect." Jeanne looks down at the camera as if she was an older woman demanding respect from her misbehaving children in the street outside of the RWC.

Jeanne's self-representation and reflection was particularly salient in the context of summer 2020 and the growing momentum around the BLM movement. Jeanne understood that she was "seen" in ways that did not always reflect her multiple experiences or identities, and she used the digital platform to assert and claim various aspects of her selfhood. There is a multiplicity within a self that cannot be reduced to stereotypes, and Jeanne created the space to complicate the ways in which she is visually understood. She is a survivor, she is beautiful, she is American, and she is a member of the Banyamulenge community. Her clothes are not just bright and bold fabrics, they are part of her multilayered story and self.

On a different day, Jeanne was wearing a blue two-piece set (see ***Figures 4*** and ***5***). The top is called an iribaya and the bottom part is an ipantaro. The clothes are highly valued in her community because they are handmade and quite versatile. The top is often worn by younger women with jeans, and the pants can be matched

Figures 4 and 5 Jeanne Sinzinkayo notes that Americans are not well trained in visual literacy. "My clothes are not just bold; they represent memories and have cultural meaning."

with a simple, fitted t-shirt, which makes it easier to wear them in an urban environment. Banyamulenge clothes have deep cultural significance and are not just "brightly colored," Jeanne stated. "I wish I could wear these clothes in Albany, but it is not so easy to do that." Sometimes, Jeanne is asked if she is African, and it will elicit a critical response from her. She explains that she is a U.S. citizen and that being called African makes an assumption that the entire continent of Africa represents the idea that there is just one homogenous linguistic, cultural, and ethnic group in all of Africa. Of course, Africa is a huge continent with enormous diversity. Jeanne affirms this by defining herself as "a Banyamulenge and a survivor of the Gatumba genocide," and, it is significant to remember, that she is an American as well.

As a central component of the team's commitment to ensure voice and agency, everyone agreed to discuss, develop and abide by a carefully crafted "West Hill Refugee Welcome Center & Refugee Voice Project Ethical Image Policy." This policy concretized and extended the team's ability to apply theory to specific methods, and at the same time uphold the team's responsibility to community members. Over a period of several weeks, a four-page document was jointly crafted to serve both as a tool for and as an outcome of this project. The media policy stated that:

> The West Hill Refugee Welcome Center (RWC) takes seriously the responsibility to uphold the dignity of community members through respectful use of image and videography. The RWC understands that there are negative consequences of unfair representation, and focuses on professional ethics and diverse interpretations of morality. The RWC only promotes media representations that are both socially and culturally appropriate according to the people who are involved. Everyone has a right to fair and accurate representations of their lives, cultures, and perspectives, including the right to transparency and honesty on the part of our Refugee Voice team. This includes the right to consent and to make decisions about if, how, or when individuals or groups are represented. The West Hill RWC ensures that we treat every person with dignity and respect. This extends to all aspects of image and video gathering/reproduction. Every person should feel like an active participant in the image making process. (2020).

This media policy contributed to the team's ability to actualize its commitment to critical theory as part of method and praxis, and positioned members of the community as co-researchers to enact their distinct sense of agency within the project. Furthermore, the process of developing a media policy encouraged team discussions about every person's positionality within the larger project. Team members consistently affirmed to remind themselves that the majority of non-refugee participants lived outside of the West Hill neighborhood. As faculty and students, it was essential to be mindful of privileged positions and larger power dynamics (although the team included non-US citizens and resettled refugees). The team agreed that the approach to digital storytelling ideas expressed by community members could not be overridden or redirected toward another theme, nor could individual team members shape narratives of participating resettled refugees. The images and accompanying stories/narratives or social critiques belonged to the participants. The focus remained to create an accessible space in which participants could critically examine and reshape broad societal assumptions or stereotypes about refugees through their own experiences and social understandings or contexts.

THE PLACE: TOWARDS BELONGING AND INCLUSION

As this project moved forward into the fall months of 2021, it aimed to re-center theoretical and practical frameworks around the concept of social cohesion. Broadly conceived, the notion of social cohesion relies on the understanding that members of a community cooperate to improve their own sense of neighborhood belonging. It is important to understand the notion of belonging as a form of public recognition so that community members are accepted as legitimate residents with equal rights and the ability to partake in innovative or productive economic activities (Fonseca, Lukosch & Brazier, 2019). Improved communal social cohesion is expected to produce positive long-term outcomes that are manifested through educational achievements and rising health indicators for families; such factors often also shape long-term economic prosperity (Speer, Jackson & Peterson, 2001).

Access to social cohesion in a neighborhood may be elusive for resettled refugees when political discourses question their legitimacy in the country or portray them as an economic burden to other community residents. Further complications impacting their access to cohesion include assumptions related to their socio-political, religious, or cultural networks, and their overall levels of communal integration. Creating an accessible space for educational, creative and cultural activities such as the RWC can serve to enhance the recognition of resettled refugees and invite their active communal participation. Resettled refugees with an interest in asserting agency and voice can position themselves in such a space to share alternative narratives and encourage a process of questioning exclusionary approaches. Performing such acts of questioning in their neighborhood (through a digital narrative and photo series) also encourages the emergence of opportunities for increased intersectional thinking and advancing the understanding of social cohesion in communities.

Reflexive researchers involved in a community-engaged participatory action research project need to continually re-examine both theoretical and practical approaches, allowing each to dialectically inform the other. As faculty members, we are preparing teams for full-time engagement during spring and summer 2022 (June-August). When COVID-19 restrictions were beginning to be lifted, we encouraged intersectional opportunities such as thinking about social justice and activism in everyday life for resettled refugees and long-term BIPOC community members in West Hill. The team's commitment to remaining physically present in the neighborhood grounds both our theory and praxis in important ways. In support of community-led efforts towards further communal interaction and engagement, we continue to implement principles advanced by Kindon et al. (2008, p. 92) that integrate "materialities, emotionalities, and aspects of nonrepresentational experience[s]."

As team leaders we pursue collaborations that advance a more complex understanding of resettled refugee experiences at the intersection of social, political, and cultural processes in West Hill. By growing opportunities for in-person activities this year, we situate ourselves in a supportive role that is guided by the community. Co-researcher participants from our first year, including Balqees and Jeanne, continue to advise this project and remain in regular contact. We have deep appreciation and respect for their involvement, especially in recognition that resettled refugees are often forced to simultaneously navigate challenging postgraduate personal and professional lives in the area. Many have to cope with emotional stress and manage financial strains and economic precarity (including sending remittances to family members abroad). Others have to identify legal teams to adjust paperwork related to residency and work permits. In light of such realities, it is a sign of deep commitment that they have stayed involved in local activism and continue to engage with communal networks. As outspoken advocates for intersectional engagement, Jeanne and Balqees raise awareness, disrupt stereotypical portrayal of refugees, and promote the importance of social cohesion for more recently resettled refugees in the West Hill neighborhood. With their involvement, we approach another generation of co-researchers to position themselves as digital storytellers in West Hill to promote intersectional awareness and expanded opportunities for social cohesion.

NOTES

1 For further detail, see the Program Policy Guidance Number 2014–02 from the U.S. Department of Urban Housing and Development Office of Economic Resilience, which defines the parameters for a racially and ethnically concentrated area of poverty *https://www.hud.gov/sites/documents/OSHC2014_02REGANALYSISIPG.PDF*.

2 Comprehensive population and housing data collected by the Census Bureau is available at *https://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/New-York/Albany/West-Hill/Race-and-Ethnicity*.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Vera Eccarius-Kelly *orcid.org/0000-0002-2206-6559*
Siena College, US

Alison Schaeffing *orcid.org/0000-0003-4245-1144*
Russell Sage College, US

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