

Deconstructing Paperlessness: Documentary, Mise-en-scene and Participation in Feminist and Decolonial Film Practices; the Case Study of LALA

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This paper critically examines LALA, a hybrid documentary-fiction film rooted in feminist, decolonial, and participatory filmmaking practices. Using an autoethnographic lens, the project reflects on the ethical and creative challenges of representing “paperlessness”—a condition of legal and symbolic invisibility experienced by second-generation Roma youth in Italy. Drawing on bell hooks’ concept of the “politics of location,” the work situates personal and collective trauma as sites of cultural critique and transformation. The film’s participatory development, including workshops inspired by Augusto Boal, Paulo Freire, and Pina Bausch, fostered co-creation and embodied storytelling with marginalised teenagers. This paper explores how fiction, performance, and lived experience interweave to disrupt dominant narratives and reclaim agency for those rendered invisible by state structures. LALA thus emerges not only as a film but as a political and reparative process—one that reimagines representation through vulnerability, collaboration, and intersectional resistance.

“As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, ‘the politics of location’ necessarily calls those of us who would like to participate in the formation of a counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision” writes bell hooks in her famous article “Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness” (hooks 2015, 15). bell hooks, an extraordinarily radical thinker, who sadly passed away in her home in Kentucky after a very rich life of uninterrupted critical production, left an unforgettable legacy in the field of feminist, postcolonial critical theory. Her work enacted forms of theory and practice that push against the oppressive boundaries set by race, gender and class domination and shifting realms of power relations. Her work was never impersonal, but was always triggered by very intimate questions, such as “choice” and “location”. In so doing, bell hooks reimagined the field of cultural practice as a space for new, alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts.

Drawing on bell hooks’s concept of the “politics of location”—choosing the margin as a space of radical openness—I position myself both as filmmaker and scholar, committed to autoethnographic self-reflection and the co-creation of counter-hegemonic narratives (hooks, 2015). My ten year journey around the film

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Lala begins here: confronting "paperlessness" not only as a bureaucratic void, but as a site of trauma, invisibility, and potential transformation. This paper inscribes my filmmaking process in feminist and decolonial film traditions, expanding on autoethnography's dual aim of personal storytelling and cultural critique (Ellis et al., 2015). By weaving reflexivity into both methodology and practice, I aim to challenge dominant modes of representation and to reclaim critical identity-making from the margins.

In bell hooks' text, the work of reflecting on language as a "place of struggle", as an examination of one's own response to existing cultural practices as well as on one's own creative acts that generate change, requires critical thinkers to face their own pain, to undertake a difficult exploration of "silences", "unaddressed places" connected to "personal emotional upheaval regarding place, identity, desire" (hooks 2015, 18). hooks invites her readers to face their own 'brokenness' without simple reconciliation or facile self-renewals. A simple reconciliation would have been just another way to use the language of the 'oppressor', to surrender the erasure of the conflict. In hooks' opinion, the work of critical theory requires the acceptance and inclusion of multiple voices—our multiple voices, other people's multiple voices. hooks emphasises here this position even more in her critique of mainstream feminist discourses, highlighting the limitations imposed by dominant narratives, particularly those overlooking the complexities of intersectionality. In her work, hooks advocates for a "pedagogy of resistance", seeking to empower marginalized voices and fostering collective action against oppressive systems (D'Antone & Bianchi 2022).

My role in the making of *Lala* merges that of director, co-author, and former co-researcher, embodying a deeply embedded and reflexive approach to storytelling that resonates strongly with hooks' call for engagement with multiple, intersecting voices and the difficult work of reflection. At the heart of the project lies autoethnography—both a methodological and ethical stance that anchors the film in personal and collective histories. This approach requires intimate engagement with my own positionality, memories, and emotions, alongside a critical examination of the broader cultural and social forces shaping these experiences. In *Lala*, this is reflected through my personal reflections on my grandmother's exile, whose legacy of displacement and trauma resonates throughout the film, foregrounding generational trauma and ongoing marginalisation. Despite the profound differences between the character of *Lala* and the person who inspired her, Zaga, this shared trauma becomes central to the meaning of my involvement in the project.

The narrative's complexity is heightened by the real-life disappearance and eventual return of Zaga, a young Roma woman confronted with her own systemic invisibility in society and forced by her life's circumstances to run away from the country that was rejecting her. This fragile reality deepened my ethical responsibility to represent her story with care. In her absence, fictionalisation became not a distancing tool but an ethical narrative strategy—respecting the limits of representation while fostering co-creation and shared authorship with participants. This collaboration ensured the film remained rooted in the lived realities of Roma, migrant, and Italian youth, moving beyond reductive portrayals

to honor the depth of their embodied experiences, and it unexpectedly gave me the space to also explore a personal dimension of this trauma.

This approach closely aligns with bell hooks's concept of the 'politics of location', which calls for critical reflection on where and how we speak—not as detached observers but as situated, embodied subjects (hooks 2015). Taken by surprise by the process itself, I found myself in a position of ongoing reflection and emotional processing. As the filmmaker, I was here not a passive witness but an active participant in meaning-making, embodying hooks's insistence that theory and practice emerge from vulnerability and political accountability, with personal narratives serving as sites of cultural critique and resistance.

The participatory workshops I facilitated as part of the ways to respond to Zaga's absence and open up the process to other young Roma participants, drew inspiration from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire 2020), and Pina Bausch's Tanztheater. These methods encouraged participants to somatise and express unspoken anxieties, traumas, and desires through embodied performance. These "shock-wave" moments of collective expression catalysed script development and anchored the film in authentic, lived experience, enabling the visceral communication of complex dynamics of marginalization and invisibility. Drawing on Boal's Forum Theatre (Boal & McBride, 2020), and Brechtian techniques that break the 'fourth wall', the edited film deliberately created moments of narrative and emotional displacement, by drawing from the immediacy and the unexpected experienced during the workshops. This disruption mirrored the disorientation felt by those navigating the bureaucratic labyrinths of citizenship. For the audience, these strategies exposed the mechanisms of the "othering gaze" (Bhabha, 1994), while for participants to the film process, they worked to reclaim a visibility often denied by dominant societal narratives. Central to this process was the use of performance as a method to challenge self-censorship and to foster vulnerable, genuine expression. By inviting the audience into a space of critical engagement, the film challenged passive spectatorship and encouraged reflection on the power dynamics embedded in representation itself. The construction of identity as "psychic, sexual, and social" (de Lauretis, 1987) further underscored the impossibility of assimilation under systemic oppression, instead embracing fragmentation and multiplicity as conditions of subjecthood. This approach aligns with feminist and decolonial filmmaking practices developed since the 1970s, which insist on representation as a political act and call for inclusive, relational authorship. Beyond the performance space, the implications extend to wider cultural and political discourse, calling attention to how marginalized voices can reclaim narrative agency and disrupt dominant paradigms.

In sum, the integration of Boal's, Brecht's, and Bausch's methodologies within this participatory framework allowed for a dismantling of traditional narrative structures. This approaches fostered a filmic and performative space where both participants and audiences could engage more deeply with the complexities of identity, migration, and citizenship—ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and resistant cultural imagination.

As bell hooks emphasizes, theory must arise from personal struggle and remain accountable to collective histories of pain, resilience, and resistance and must remain anchored in corporeality. This ethos deeply informed the autoethnographic approach, which balanced self-reflection with cultural critique, weaving personal stories into multi-voiced narratives that illuminate the intricate social and cultural forces shaping experience (Ellis et al., 2015). Autoethnography as a reflexive practice compelled me to confront my positionality, biases, and power relations inherent in the project, disrupting traditional hierarchies between subject and object, observer and observed—embodying hooks’s vision of counter-hegemonic cultural work that values multiplicity, inclusivity, and relationality towards the community I collaborated with. All of this was reflected both in the creation and the delivery of the project, reflecting on the multilayered approach at every step.

In sum, in *Lala* autoethnography functions not merely as a research method, but as a political and aesthetic strategy challenging dominant narratives of invisibility and exclusion. It opened space for marginalized voices to narrate their own experiences on their terms, while inviting both filmmaker and audience to engage critically and compassionately with the complex intersections of identity, trauma, and resistance.

With an awareness of the potential biases inherent in autoethnographic inquiry, I therefore set out to critically examine the decade-long process of making *Lala*—a film born from personal, ethical, and political imperatives. My aim is to explore whether the creative journey behind the film succeeded in confronting “paperlessness” as a condition of invisibility, trauma, and the systemic reproduction of marginality. Central to this process was the idea of filmmaking as an act of reparation—understood not simply as healing, but as an embodied “awareness of a wound” (Attia, 2018). Filming became a way of transforming displacement and erasure into recognition and voice, a commitment that remained at the heart of the project throughout its development.

This article takes *Lala* as its central case study. In the first section, I outline the theoretical trajectories that the film intersects—frameworks that emerged not from a predefined blueprint, but organically through the filmmaking process itself. I then trace the evolution of the project, highlighting the choices, constraints, shortcomings and discoveries that shaped its form. Finally, I offer reflections on the implications of this experience for decolonial and feminist film practice.

Approaching this analysis through a scholarly lens, I explore the conceptual frameworks *Lala* engages with. The film tells the story of a young Roma woman navigating a bureaucratic labyrinth that denies her legal recognition. Combining documentary techniques, archival material, and staged sequences, *Lala* investigates the legal and symbolic voids surrounding Italian citizenship for second-generation Roma youth. The decision to stage a fictional film within the documentary process became a catalyst for collective reflection among the teenage participants—an exploration of paperlessness as both a lived condition and systemic erasure.

How did I come to this film? How did this structure come to life? As the director of *Lala*, I believe it is essential to outline the creative journey and motivations behind the film’s evolution. Many of our decisions emerged organically, shaped by

real-life circumstances. *Lala* draws on the lived experiences of second-generation Roma teenagers and young adults who have faced lifelong paperlessness. Although born and raised in Italy, many come from Balkan refugee families whose legal status remained unresolved for years—leaving these children marginalized despite their integration into public schools. At the film's center is *Lala*, a 17-year-old Roma single mother living in a squatted apartment in Tor Bella Monaca, Rome. With no legal documentation, she must secure her papers before her 18th birthday to avoid losing custody of her son, Toto. Set against the grey areas of Italian citizenship law, the story unfolds as *Lala* creates a new identity in a desperate bid to remain in Italy. Her narrative is mirrored by the experiences of Samantha, the non-professional actress portraying her, as well as Zaga, the young woman whose story initially inspired the project. The film is rooted in my own family history of exile and survival, particularly my paternal grandmother, who escaped war-torn Europe during WWII and carried a lifelong sense of paperlessness and invisibility. In 2012, driven by this personal connection, I began exploring the Roma camp where I met 17-year-old Zaga. Together we began filming a documentary recounting her struggle for recognition and rights—born and raised in Rome yet undocumented due to her parents' lack of refugee status from exile in Yugoslavia. Our collaboration was abruptly interrupted when Zaga disappeared just before turning 18, after exhausting every effort to secure her identity papers. Her sudden absence left me searching for months, and her story—the ongoing fight for dignity within a society that often treats Roma as second-class citizens—became the emotional and ethical foundation of *Lala*.

While French cinema offers numerous examples of films that deeply engage with community issues and themes—most notably the remarkable works of Tony Gatlif—Italian cinema has comparatively few films addressing these topics. Only a few films depicted the contemporary situation of young Roma people, caught between the world of their parents, that of their contemporaries and the contradictions of their sometimes quite complex bureaucratic framework. *Io Rom Romantica* (2013) is an intimate documentary by Italian filmmaker and Roma activist Laura Halilovic. It offers a rare, personal glimpse into the daily lives, struggles, and resilience of Roma women, challenging stereotypical portrayals by centering their voices and experiences with sensitivity and respect. The film highlights issues of identity, discrimination, and cultural pride within the Roma community. On the contrary, *A Ciambra* (2017), directed by Italian – American filmmaker Jonas Carpignano, is a gritty, coming-of-age drama set in a Romani community in Calabria, Italy. The film follows the teenage protagonist, Pio Amato, navigating life between his tight-knit community and the wider Italian society. Praised for its authentic casting and raw storytelling, *A Ciambra* explores themes of belonging, marginalization, and the complexities of growing up on the fringes of society.

How to realise this project I had in mind in an ethical way? How to do it in a way that also reflected the incredible lack of representation of the Roma community in Italian cinema, alongside a pressing need for a more universal perspective that addresses issues of citizenship—a struggle that, tragically, affects many migrant communities but manifests with particular severity within the Roma population?

Zaga was no longer available to give her consent or to tell her story in her own words. I chose to explore the story of a girl whose experiences closely mirrored Zaga's, creating a fictional narrative supported by other teenagers with similar backgrounds who could bring authenticity and truth to the project. I transformed what I had learned from Zaga into a film inspired by the stories she shared with me, believing this to be the most powerful way to convey the core truth at the heart of her fight for rights. The script was shaped by the personal experiences of the group, and over time we co-created the film's space, allowing it to evolve organically. Throughout the nine years since I began working with Zaga, I never stopped searching for her. Then, just as suddenly as she had disappeared, she reappeared—and now, by adding her own voice to this singular journey of life and truth-seeking, Zaga actively participates in the film inspired by her story.

Our shared experience evolved into a pursuit of collective truth—one that is at times intimate, at times painful, but always consciously communal and collective. Throughout the making of this film, I realized that this story of initiation against rejection needed to be told collaboratively—between me, Zaga, and everyone involved as protagonists—for it to truly become our shared narrative. We all carried a profound faith in life alongside a hunger felt deeply by those who see themselves as born by chance—the “survivors”. The trauma of exile echoes across three generations, a legacy of history's wounds passed down like an unconscious ghost. This trauma, fueled by the unresolved suffering of those who came before us, manifests as a pervasive sense of rejection, even when the original cause remains unremembered.

As part of the development of the film, I organised a series of participatory training workshops with Roma, Italian and migrant teenagers which I mentioned before—all teenagers were invited to work physically and conceptually on the idea of the “unspoken”. In that context I experimented with different methods—from the Forum methodology developed in Augusto Boal's (Boal 1995, 201) theatre investigation, to the pedagogy of the oppressed developed by Paulo Freire and the Tanztheater physical techniques developed by Pina Bausch, as previously described. Through these techniques we worked on the creation of a safe environment where people were encouraged to physically inhabit memories, feelings, stories that could be expressed through their body and voice. Within this mechanism, each participant felt inspired to express unspoken feelings, never addressed anxieties, unprocessed desires, which interacted with other participants' emotions. What happened was something like a shock wave, the encounter between particles charged with enormous energy¹, which fueled the imagination of the film and brought to light the real experiences of the participants and became the catalyst of script development. In the perspective of participatory writing the film is based on, this process led participants to make proposals that enriched the initial screenplay, the characters, the atmospheres, the emotional, relational and visual universe the film

¹ Lala Project material written by Ludovica Fales, producer David Cej, acting coach Antonio Calone.

took place in, leading to several versions of the screenplay before the final one.

Augusto Boal's Forum Theater generally begins with a short performance, either rehearsed or improvised, which contains demonstrations of social or political problems. Forum Theater, one of the major techniques within Theatre of the Oppressed, allows spectators to collaborate in the experience by becoming "spectators" (members of the audiences participating in the actual performance). Through a moderator and a group of actively engaged spectators, Forum Theatre embodies dialogues, exchanges, learning, teaching, and pleasure. At the conclusion, the play will begin again with the audience being able to replace or add to the characters on stage to present their interventions; alternate solutions to the problems faced.

During the rehearsals, we used this model for improvisations:

- Exploration of emotional states only with the body and without words (examples: dignity vs humiliation; challenge vs fearlessness; vulnerability vs fear etc...) first alone and then in couples
- Discussion about what other people saw in the improvisation / role exchange
- Writing about memories and present situations one can connect to improvisations / sharing
- Adding words to certain scenes that came out as connecting to people's personal experiences
- Identifying scenes of the film /building up characters
- Testing scenes from the script / rewriting
- Filming the process of bringing the character to life

During and after these rehearsals, participants were asked to document their experience and express their thoughts and feelings. Here there are some of the comments collected just after the end of the workshops: "Preparation exercises made me think a lot of the complexity of each individual" wrote one of the Roma non professional actors involved in the film and Roma activist, Miguel Lebbiati, "each individual is the result of a crossroad of experiences, examples, cultural, social, environmental – and especially perceptual – factors. Sometimes we are not conscious of how interconnected we are, and how each one of us can potentially become a victim or a perpetrator". "This experience" – wrote another participant, Roma blogger and artist Ivana Nikolic – "influenced me in thinking about how I want to persevere in a process of inner and physical peace. It helped me find the courage and strength to face the demons of my past. To be at peace with myself"².

The inquiry into performative methods for expressing unarticulated emotions and traumas associated with particular forms of societal marginality, as well as strategies for dismantling self-censorship mechanisms, emerged distinctly throughout this process (Foucault 1975). It made me reflect on the relationship between the *documentary* and the *performative* material we collected both in the

² Material collected by Ludovica Fales for the exhibition "Bordered Lives", Ludovica Fales, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll and Emma Humphris,VBKOE, September 2021

construction of the filmic process as well as in the filmic stylistic choices. Stella Bruzzi (2006) posits that documentaries are not merely vehicles for conveying factual information; rather, they are performative acts that create truth through the act of filming itself. This perspective challenges traditional notions of documentary as an objective representation of reality and emphasizes the fluid and unstable nature of documentary truth.

These reflections led me to further reflect on the articulation of the layers in the film through the creation of the relationship between a fictional tale—the story of character *Lala*, inspired to a real story—and a documentary layer—the real stories of all non professional actors participating to the project, and that of Zaga. The main goal was to allow an active participation of the audience through the awareness of this articulation. This is to me a form of resistance to the conventional representations of impotence and subalternity—as bell hooks brilliantly expresses—an experience of awareness of the film's construction that allows the audience to reflect on the power dynamics embedded in their/our gaze.

For the first year of improvisation, while we were planning to make solely a fictional film with nonprofessional actors, inspired by the real story of a woman who had disappeared, I was unconsciously hiding behind the script and the improvisation process. The script was there to be challenged, changed, enriched and I unconsciously felt safe as the written world/ the story world was the catalyst of the conflict. All people gathered there to improvise and myself were avoiding the other elephant in the room: the fact I was not Roma and that this position needed to be challenged and articulated.

One day, during one improvisation one of the participants (I will use the pronoun “they” here) re-enacted a very moving episode of their life: when coming back from a journey to Auschwitz, during which their classmates had shown understanding of the historical facts and empathy towards the victims of the camps, some colleagues started making racist comments. The participant exploded and confessed they had hidden her identity for all of those years—their Roma identity—precisely because of their comments. They accused them of hypocrisy and cowardness. I jumped in and told them the story of my grandmother and how the situation had led a woman in the building where my grandmother lived with her mother, to conceal their identity to allow them to gain time to escape deportation.

From that day onwards, the situation shifted. My story also became material for the film and it got discussed in several instances, until one day I asked one participant if they thought it was legitimate to make a film about Roma not being one. They answered it wasn't entirely legitimate, but they also said I actually wasn't making a film about being Roma, but rather on a universal condition of invisibility that was caused by the bureaucratic hurdle caused by lack of papers' recognition. This was something I could totally understand, in their opinion, and I legitimately could talk about.

These two episodes changed my position in the process and I suddenly felt I could understand why we were all there, part of this collective space we had created. The invisibility and rejection brought about by bureaucratic papers' denial was something that marked people even after two generations from the

actual fact. *Lala* was the perfect symbol—born from migrant parents she was the one who should have the possibility to settle. Instead, the lack of papers gets her to question all of her sense of belonging and pushes her to create a new identity to survive. *Lala's* symbol brought us all together in the creation of this ritual, where each one of us was able to embody several positions in the victim/perpetrator game and really go deep into the scars of this systematic rejection.

Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of the effects of trauma from one generation to the next, impacting the psychological and emotional well-being of descendants of trauma survivors. For example, Knight's exploration of Black parental trauma in the context of apartheid illustrates how systemic oppression can perpetuate trauma across generations, influencing identity and interpersonal relationships (Knight, 2019). Similarly, the experiences of Indigenous populations, as discussed by Cowan, reveal how historical traumas, such as those experienced in residential schools, continue to impact parenting styles and family structures, perpetuating cycles of trauma (Braga et al., 2012). Moreover, the resilience of families in the face of intergenerational trauma has been a focal point in recent studies. Braga emphasize that while trauma can be transmitted, patterns of resilience can also emerge, allowing some descendants to navigate their inherited trauma effectively (*Ibidem*). This resilience can be fostered through supportive relationships and community practices that promote healing and understanding (Cromer et al., 2017; Woods et al., 2022). The field of intergenerational trauma is obviously not my field, as it relates to psychology, but it was important to understand the potential of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in this context. Boal's Theater of the Oppressed is rooted in the principles of critical pedagogy, particularly those articulated by Paulo Freire (Freire 1968). It emphasizes participatory engagement and the importance of giving voice to marginalized communities. Platt and Bobele note that the application of Theatre of the Oppressed in community settings has facilitated dialogues around clinical issues, demonstrating its potential as a therapeutic tool in addressing the psychological impacts of intergenerational trauma (Platt & Bobele 2022). This participatory approach allows individuals to re-enact and analyze their lived experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of how trauma is interwoven with social injustices.

The three-layered articulation of the film is therefore the result of this archaeological process of excavation which led each one of us to uncover a hidden part of ourselves. In this process we all found a truth that made us accept the multiplicity of voices and articulation of this defamiliarisation/familiarisation process which became the main driver of the film development. The three-layered articulation of the film emerges as a product of an archaeological process of excavation, wherein each participant engaged in a profound journey of self-discovery, unearthing aspects of their identities that had previously remained concealed. This excavation is not merely a metaphorical digging; it represents a critical engagement with personal histories, cultural narratives, and collective memories that shape our understanding of self and community. As we delved into these layers, we encountered truths that compelled us to embrace the multiplicity of voices that contribute to our shared experiences. In this process, the act of

defamiliarisation—where familiar concepts and narratives are presented in new and unexpected ways—allowed us to critically reflect on our preconceived notions and biases. This technique, rooted in the theories of Viktor Shklovsky (1917), serves to disrupt the ordinary and provoke a deeper engagement with the material. By presenting our stories through a lens of defamiliarisation, we were able to challenge dominant narratives and highlight the complexities of our lived experiences. This approach not only facilitated a richer understanding of our individual and collective identities but also fostered an environment where diverse perspectives could coexist and be valued. The familiarisation aspect of this process further reinforced our connection to the material. As we unearthed hidden truths, we began to recognize the shared struggles and triumphs that bind us together as a community. This recognition of commonality became a powerful catalyst for collaboration, as we collectively navigated the intricacies of our narratives. The interplay between defamiliarisation and familiarisation thus became the driving force behind the film's development, allowing us to create a work that resonates with authenticity and depth. Moreover, the three-layered articulation of the film can be understood as a reflection of the intersectionality of our identities. As we excavated our personal histories, we encountered the complexities of race, gender, class, and culture that shape our experiences. By acknowledging these layers, we were able to create a film that not only represents individual voices but also highlights the systemic structures that influence our lives. In conclusion, the three-layered articulation of the film is a testament to the transformative power of the excavation process. Through this journey, we unearthed hidden aspects of ourselves, embraced the multiplicity of voices, and engaged in a dynamic process of defamiliarisation and familiarisation. This approach not only enriched the film's narrative but also fostered a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity and community, ultimately leading to a work that is both reflective and resonant.

Challenging conventions associated with realism aimed at serving as a means of empowering audiences who are politically conscious and positioned for active participation. In this context, marginalized spectators are viewed as equivalent to resistant spectators (Diawara 1993), as they disrupt the status quo by moving away from the pleasure of identification towards the pleasure of resistance (hooks 1989). Furthermore, concepts such as migration, mobility, and transnationalism are pivotal in rethinking, or more accurately, unthinking rigid notions of nations, identities, and belonging that extend beyond mere representation (Ponzanesi 2011). These concepts also play a crucial role in themselves in interrogating cinematic conventions that perpetuate power dynamics under the guise of a singular representation of space, time, and subjects. Instead, they encourage explorations that honor the specificity and materiality of lived experiences at borders, thereby problematizing rather than reinforcing dominant Western tropes of visibility (Chang and Ling, 2000). Finally, the concept of 'safe space' was proposed as a decolonial design practice encouraging collaboration (Kambunga et al., 2023). This goes beyond community participation in the research stage, extending into collaborative creation.

The use of art and media as tools for social change has been explored by bell

hooks herself (1996) as the role of visual art in shaping cultural narratives and its potential to challenge oppressive systems. She argues that art can serve as a powerful medium for expressing resistance and fostering community solidarity among marginalized groups. On the other hand, in his foundational text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire emphasizes the importance of dialogue and storytelling in the process of liberation. He argues that education should be a collaborative and participatory process that empowers individuals to critically engage with their realities. Freire's ideas resonate with the notion of using art and media as tools for social change, as they both seek to challenge oppressive narratives and foster empowerment. More recently, Jacques Rancière (2009) challenges traditional notions of spectatorship in art and performance, proposing that spectators can be active participants in the creation of meaning. He argues that art has the potential to disrupt established hierarchies and empower individuals to engage with social issues critically. This work aligns with the idea that storytelling through art can serve as a form of resistance and empowerment. All of these positions highlight how creative practices can serve as forms of resistance, enabling marginalized voices to reclaim their narratives and assert their agency in the face of systemic oppression.

The significance of a safe space, often referred to as a "third space," lies in its capacity to provide marginalized individuals from contested contexts with an opportunity to cultivate a sense of community. The concept of third space, as articulated by theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and Edward Soja (1998), represents a transformative environment where individuals can navigate their identities and experiences outside the constraints of dominant cultural narratives. In such spaces, marginalized groups can engage in dialogue, share their stories, and foster solidarity among one another. This communal aspect is crucial, as it allows individuals to connect over shared experiences of oppression and resilience, ultimately contributing to a collective identity that transcends individual struggles. The creation of a safe space facilitates the exploration of cultural expressions and practices that may be overlooked or suppressed in mainstream society, thereby affirming the value of diverse identities and experiences. Moreover, the third space serves as a site of empowerment, where individuals can challenge prevailing power dynamics and assert their agency. By providing a platform for marginalized voices, these spaces encourage critical reflection and dialogue about issues of identity, belonging, and social justice. This aligns with the work of bell hooks (1990), who emphasizes the importance of creating spaces for marginalized voices to be heard and validated, thus fostering a sense of belonging and community. The role of safe spaces extends beyond mere physical locations; they can also manifest in virtual environments, artistic expressions, and community initiatives. By fostering environments that prioritize inclusivity and empowerment, these spaces play a critical role in challenging dominant narratives and promoting social justice.

To make the film's approach truly egalitarian, it would have clearly been necessary to discuss every single detail of the script, direction, and editing together. However, this level of collaboration was not fully achieved during the process, leaving room for more traditional dynamics where certain decisions

remained primarily in the hands of the director or production team. Considering all the difficulties we encountered during the shoot, the choice made in this respect was to retain a certain amount of creative control. This decision, while necessary under the circumstances, inevitably limited the extent to which the process could be fully egalitarian. The pandemic, delayed funding, and various issues that arose during the reshoots all posed significant challenges, had to be translated into the film's language and I chose to keep the responsibility in my hands to ensure some continuity and consistency. It is also true, however, that little by little, the "us versus them" division typical of more traditional films had gradually begun to break down. Some of the participants were involved behind the camera during filming and, at times, watched the footage together with us. After I initially transcribed and drafted the script based on the rehearsal recordings, the editing decisions were then made collaboratively to ensure the text matched the natural flow of the spoken language.

I recognize that this collaborative approach, while involving participants in key aspects of the creative process, ultimately left the directorial responsibility firmly in my hands—a dynamic that is inherently problematic. This concentration of decision-making power raises important questions about authorship, control, and the balance between collaboration and authority. However, given the numerous practical challenges we faced—ranging from logistical constraints to unforeseen difficulties during production—I struggled to envision an alternative path that would allow the film to reach completion. In this context, maintaining a degree of directorial control felt like a necessary compromise to ensure the project's coherence and eventual realization, even if it meant accepting tensions between ideal collaboration and pragmatic necessity.

At the same time, I believe that the creation of a "third space" genuinely took place—a space that transcended the inevitable limitations of the creative process itself. The making of the film was not just about producing a work with its unavoidable constraints, but about fostering a site of struggle and dialogue. This was realized through the construction of a multilayered narrative that continuously invited the audience to question and reflect on what they were witnessing. Rather than offering a single, fixed perspective, the film encouraged viewers to engage critically and dynamically, disrupting passive consumption and opening up possibilities for new understandings and solidarities.

Moreover, the way the film was distributed reinforced this dynamic. Screenings were organized from the ground up, often involving the protagonists themselves and prioritizing spaces where discussion and dialogue were fundamental. This grassroots approach to distribution mirrored the collaborative and participatory spirit of the film's creation, turning each screening into a site of engagement and collective reflection. It was not just about showing the film, but about fostering ongoing conversations that extended the film's impact beyond the screen and into lived social realities.

In conclusion, the film *Lala* was my attempt to reflect on language itself as a "place of struggle". It attempted at empowering audiences by challenging conventional realism. It positions spectators as resistant participants, shifting

from mere identification to active questioning, thereby highlighting cinema's potential as a catalyst for social change. Key concepts such as migration, mobility, and transnationalism are essential for rethinking rigid notions of identity and belonging, interrogating cinematic conventions that reinforce the power dynamics established by borders themselves. By focusing on the specificity of lived experiences at borders, *Lala* attempted at critiquing dominant representations and attempting at enriching the narrative and engaging with the complexities of identity in a globalized context. The film also introduces the idea of 'safe space' as a decolonial practice that fosters collaboration and community, including the audience itself in this space. This "third space" allows for the navigation of identities outside dominant narratives, promoting dialogue and solidarity. In establishing this safe space in common with the audience, I tried to encourage the investigation of varied cultural expressions, contesting prevailing narratives and advancing social justice, thereby nurturing a shared identity that goes beyond individual challenges and essentialist identities.

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