

Project Finding Home 2nd & 3rd media workshops- Field Work Notes Dec-March 2019-2020 Marusya Bociurkiw

In December 2019 I began working with Lokchi Lam, a videomaker and media instructor, originally from Hong Kong, to organize a series of six workshops with LGBTQ+ asylum-seekers affiliated with the MCC church— a gay Church with a mostly white congregation. MCC has a refugee ministry that supports thousands of refugees fleeing anti-gay laws around the world. Lokchi and I planned workshops that would provide basic video recording and storytelling skills, which we hoped would result in a series of public service announcements to do with challenges facing LGBT refugees in Canada. Focusing on the point of arrival rather than the point of departure, we hope to avoid the gratitude narrative that is expected of newcomers to Canada. At Lokchi's suggestion, all but two of the workshops were held at Ryerson University. Lokchi noted that when she arrived in Canada, she felt that many doors were closed to her: "This will be away to open a door", she said. I was initially concerned about pushback from university security, but worked with them to explain the nature of the workshop and its participants. And so, approximately every other Sunday between December and March, some 30 refugees from African countries descended upon the Rogers Communications Centre and made great use of Ryerson equipment, studios, and student volunteers.

We expected perhaps 10 participants, and were both overwhelmed and pleasantly surprised to see about 30 participants at every session. Part of this was due to the visits I had made to a couple of refugee sessions at the church. I also did a considerable amount of email outreach, and worked as closely as I could with Martha and Aleks, the refugee program coordinators. It was one of the coldest winter's we'd had in a while; even so, the participants showed up week after week. I think part of it was Lokchi's genius suggestion to hold the workshops at Ryerson – an environment so different from the other institutional environments they move in and are often surveilled by. A place of learning, that was offering, rather than taking something. But I think it was also that we provided food and transit fare; there was a promise of a certificate at the end; and maybe it was also that we took the task seriously and expected as much from them.

The sessions were a bit chaotic—it's difficult to provide professional media instruction to so many people at once. We had sessions in three-point lighting, camera operation, sound recording, the art of the interview, writing monologues, and editing. We also spent time brainstorming and discussing the main themes, which were identified as housing, employment, and the interminable refugee determination process. This often led to heated discussion, and provided a way for the participants to express some of their frustrations with governments, racist landlords, and the colonial structure of "Canadian experience". All of the participants were from African countries – Nigeria, mostly, where both tribal and government structures are brutally punitive of LGBT existence. Despite what they've been through – arduous border crossings, abysmal shelter or substandard housing, barriers everywhere – they generally presented as cheerful, gracious and uncomplaining. I'm not in a position to say whether these

were cultural behaviors or a response to Canadian expectations of immigrants. It took a while to create a space that felt safe enough for other affects to emerge.

We improvised as we went along. Eventually we developed a process of dividing the large group into smaller groups, and having them rotate between various crew positions and tasks. Thus, for example, Group 1 would form a tech crew of five or six, and conduct an interview with one of the participants. Group 2 would go outside and film B roll. Group 3 would film dramatic reenactments inside. We also did an animation workshop with filmmaker Barb Taylor; there was a lot of pleasure in engaging in a rather more crafty process and messing around with plastiscine, colored paper, drawing, and stop motion animation.

I was pleasantly surprised to see the women take positions of leadership almost immediately. They showed no fear of the technology and the equipment, and handled their tech roles with pride and grace. These are people come from wide variety of professional backgrounds: banking, retail, management, business, parenting - but they were eager to learn new skills and perfect them.

By the fifth or sixth workshop, the participants were working quite independently, developing their own thematic foci and really wanting to depict the struggles they had experienced through a very gentle and organic process of interviewing. Four of the participants became interview subjects. It was really lovely to watch the measured and compassionate way in which the on camera interviews were conducted, with the crew sharing tasks. A very safe and loving atmosphere was created, allowing difficult stories to emerge. The dramatic reenactment group was quite playful, in contrast—serious play - in which they role-played and reenacted experiences with social workers, employers and landlords. There was a lightness to all of the sessions, despite the extreme trauma the participants had all been through. Always, there was laughter and talking and socializing during lunch breaks that would stretch to an hour or longer, eating pizza, joking, and just hanging out. In the final sessions, we reviewed the footage we shot, and solicited feedback. One thing that stood out was that they also wanted to show the joy and relief of being in Canada, so later, during the editing process we make sure to have bright colors, upbeat music, and a sense of hope at the end. At the very last session, we handed out certificates and somehow this became a kind of graduation ceremony with much applause and photos and a cake.

Over the summer, I worked with a professional editor, Karen Vanderboght, also a migrant - to create a final work. The footage no longer lent itself to short PSA's and resulted, instead, in a 10 minute film that tells the story of a professional class of black LGBT people who have escaped harrowing, hair-raising experiences of discrimination, shunning, tribal threats of torture, abuse, and hate crimes, only to come here and be told that their education and their professional experience is worth next to nothing. On top of that, they are subjected to months and years of waiting for hearings and appeals. But what also comes through is their kindness, patience and resolve, and their deep relief that being in a place where they can express their sexuality more-or-less freely. Subtextually, I think the film raises questions about whether sexual liberation can exist without racial and economic equity.

In retrospect, I wish we hadn't improvised so much at the beginning; part of this was due to differences in opinion between Lokchi and myself as to whether there should be such an emphasis on a professional finished product – her style is much more about process - creating, performing and filming short skits – whereas I wanted there to be a finished product that could be used educationally. So, we compromised, but I think it's better to have a definite plan and stick to it.

When the pandemic began in March 2019, I felt quite concerned about this refugee community, and thought that trying to engage them online to do workshops might be a good distraction, if nothing else. So I organized five workshops taught by different artist colleagues of mine, partially funded by my department at Ryerson. The workshops were on different topics: in one, the instructor, Elizabeth Last, showed them an old Bob Dylan music video (Subterranean Homesick Blues) in which Dylan uses pieces of paper with text. She asked them to write their feelings about self-isolating during the pandemic on pieces of paper, and film that on their cell phones. We edited those short videos together and created a crude but moving short video in which they expressed fear, a sense of isolation, panic, boredom and other affects. When we showed the video to the refugee program coordinators, they found it helpful to get that information. In another workshop, Elizabeth showed them the photos of Henri Cartier-Bresson and instructed them in various camera techniques with the goal of creating a photo with a “decisive moment” a la Bresson. Another instructor had them compile or create photos, write a short monologue about their own personal journeys, and create digital stories. One of the participants planned to use his digital story in his IRB hearing. Midi Onodera gave a somewhat abstract but effective workshop on the artist's relationship to the camera and to artistic practice. With Meera Govindasamy, they learned the basics of podcast creation. The attendance for these workshops was small, but I think that they served as a creative outlet and a distraction nonetheless. Sometimes, people would just attend without participating, listening while they reclined on a couch or did stuff at home. At one session, a woman spent the whole time braiding her hair but also listening and commenting occasionally.

These online workshops demonstrated the unintended uses to which community art can be deployed, whether it's providing evidence for a refugee hearing, or just providing a sense of community, or solace. For myself, those pandemic workshops were deeply moving. The smallness of them allowed me to get to know the participants better and to be a witness to their experience.

I would have liked to have seen a slightly larger group for this workshop series, so I think incentives, like food gift cards and perhaps also equipment is important as well as asking for a commitment from participants. That being said, it was the early days of the pandemic, and the participants' trauma was very real. I think these workshops made a difference for those who were able to attend.