

Project Finding Home: Notes on Fieldwork May 2019

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My Ryerson team - postdoc Jen, and undergrad research assistant Ayat led 3 workshops at MCC Church on using art and photography to discuss placemaking and what home means to them. Our hope was to develop some recommendations for community and government policy. We began with a session led by Jen, in which we diagrammed our routes to MCC Church with string, talking about the different places we live. Jen followed this with a session on planting cuttings and painting the pots the cuttings would go in, which allowed for conversation about where they came from and their arduous journey to Canada.

As part of our second session, we invited Shelby to give a photography workshop in the second session, providing them w information on photographic technology and aesthetics. We would then do a walk from MCC Church to an art show about LGBT refugees at Daniel's Spectrum. The skills training placed the women in a greater position of authority. After workshopping indoors and outside, Shelby came with us to a cafe. Here, outside of the institutional setting, the women felt free to take photos inside the cafe, of plants, of each other, of a mother's day sign.

We had been following the lead of walking method projects before us, which seem to use rather indirect, elliptical questions to get at issues regarding housing, employment, social service etc. These women, while initially rather reticent, seemed bewildered by these indirect questions. It was only when we asked more directly socio-political questions like, " I i.d. as queer or lesbian, how do you identify [sexually]?" " Have you had your [IRB] hearing?" " We know you ,love Canada, but what would you change?" that affective and more complex responses emerged.

The women went on at great length about how much better it is to be in Canada, but they also had a lot of ideas that overlap with municipal, provincial and federal policy. They immediately started talking about the need for more parties; specifically, outdoor parties, with dancing. Ayat told them about Lavender, a monthly women's party. They then went on to talk about the need for employment and recommended that refugees be offered internships immediately upon arrival. They feel frustrated at not working (you can't legally get a job in Canada until after a successful IRB hearing). They said repeatedly, "We are ready to work." They knew all about the Ford cutbacks to legal services for refugees, and were distressed about it. Flora talked about how you can't really do a successful IRB hearing without a lawyer. They also spoke again to the difficulties of finding affordable housing in Toronto, and how landlords repeatedly ask them for huge amounts of information, like banking and tax documents, which most of them would not have at this point. Tola talked about a racist landlord—"Chinese" she said looking at Jennifer, who is Chinese. When she didn't get the apartment, she

phoned the landlord and asked him if it was because she was Black. The women also recommended that primarily female refugees be allowed into Canada, "because women are better organized, they work harder, they are just better."

Walking to the streetcar with Julian, I asked her how street compared to any street in Kampala, Uganda. She spoke at length about how much cleaner, more orderly and less violent it is here. I asked her if there's anything she misses, and she talked about food - an easier topic, I surmised, than family or friends. She talked about how the meat in Uganda tastes different, and better: the animals are given more time she said, and are raised in pastures so that the meat tastes richer. She can get mangoes here, but in Uganda the mangoes are everywhere in the trees, and you can pick them yourself. You can get Ugandan food here, but it's not the same, she said.

The show about LGBT refugees became an important form of elicitation. However, at first the women were more interested in the signage, and posed for each other in front of it. Perhaps just having such public signage of a photography show about LGBT refugees proved the point of why they have fled their countries, and why they are here, where there is relatively more freedom for and inclusion of LGBT people. They had spoken in the café about the different ways in which LGBT people are criminalized in Uganda, Nigeria, and Tanzania.

Julian and I looked at a photo of a Ugandan refugee for several minutes. It was a rather opaque photo, and I said I couldn't quite make out the image. Repeatedly touching the photo, she interpreted it for me and said, "There is his face, there's his hand and his fingernail. He looks very anxious. You can be put in jail for many here if you are LGBT in Uganda."

I asked Julian if she'd had her hearing yet. She said, proudly, that she had it 2 weeks ago, and it was successful. Now she can go to school. She has applied to study social work at George Brown. Flora joined us, and we talked about how the hearings work, and how sometimes very invasive sexual questions are asked. They both expressed critique about these sorts of questions, which they knew about.

We also looked at another photo, in which the photographer had manipulated the photo to repeat the same profile of a particular refugee. Some of us decided that it meant to say that the man was not alone. Tola said something about repetition: having to say the same things over and over again, the same conditions repeating themselves over and over.

We noticed that there were no photos of Tanzanian refugees. I asked Flora who is from Tanzania, about that she said that there is such extreme repression there right now that's it would make it very difficult for an LGBT refugee from Tanzania to speak

publicly. But then she spread out her arms and said, “ I'm free here. I don't care. I can say whatever I want.” “That's courageous, ”I said. She stretched out her arms again and said,, “I’m free here.”

Did the artmaking prove to be a form of research? Yes but in unexpected ways. Painting terra cotta pots and having them plant cuttings allowed for contemplation and joking around. It levelled things out a bit : confident Tola and project leader Marusya expressed insecurities about painting, while very quiet (that day) Julian did some exquisite colour mixing and paint application that spoke of a deeper confidence around creation. A film about walking method & arts based research in UK evoked anecdotes of hardship in city-run shelters.

In this case, the art show allowed the women to, in this sense, be with their people, and to outnumber the three of us from the University. The show represented the multitudes of people like them freeing anti-gay laws. They seemed to own this show in a way, and mapped their own progress through it, which was not linear, and through which they paid as much attention to signage as to the photography. They also took several pictures of one another at the show, and had Ayat take playful pictures of them. I found myself feeling impatient about the fact that they were not carefully looking at the photos and the texts. I had to let go of my own art training and academic approach. But my fatigue and frustration actually allowed me to let go, and when I came back from a break, everyone was in a circle talking about what they would be making at the next gathering, and how it would be different from this photo show. Jennifer pointed out that the show was about everything that had happened before the refugees came to Canada. "We want to talk about what happens for you here." I said, "We see you as experts." Generally, they refuse to express critique. But when their thoughts are elicited as a form of expertise or recommendation, they have much to say.