REFUGEE YOUTH &
PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE

01

OUR MANDATE

The past few years have seen a progressive expansion in the participatory possibilities of audiovisual media, with increased access to recording devices, editing facilities, and digital cartography. The explosion of social media has encouraged youth from around the world to explore how their personal and public voices can make a difference. The tools are increasingly available and the channels are there to get the work out; the potential of media to inform and enlighten appears limitless.

At the same time, rapid advances in media technology are encouraging all of us to rethink notions of literacy and to adapt our curricula and projects accordingly. If the next generation is watching, listening, and producing as much as they are reading, we must develop new tools for critical literacy and for understanding the terms of these tools and platforms. Integrating these tools into the classroom or community group, in combination with personal narratives, is a meaningful way to broaden notions of literacy, to introduce critical social issues, and to raise questions around voice, truth, ethics, history, and intellectual property.

WHO IS A YOUTH?

For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines 'youth' as those persons between 15 and 24 years of age (see www.un.org).

For our project, we worked primarily with individuals ranging from 16 to 30 years old.

When we began this project, we had a series of burning questions: How can innovative trends in technology such as digital mapping and place-based media shed light on personal and social histories, as well as issues such as globalization and migration? How can a participatory media process help newcomer youth articulate their voices and find commonalities in a period of transition? What must we be cautious about when navigating this seemingly democratized, utopian terrain of creation and distribution when dealing with difficult stories? This book/DVD/website is our collective answer to these questions.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES THAT YOUTH WITH REFUGEE EXPERIENCE FACE IN ARRIVING TO CANADA?

The young individuals involved in our workshops were forced to f ee their countries for diverse reasons, including gendered violence, persecution based on sexual orientation, and violence as a result of armed conf ict. We hope that the diversity of their experiences helps to demystify what it means to be a refugee or to be impacted by refugee experiences. Additionally, we want to spread awareness of the specific needs of newcomer youth who often

arrive alone, who are often forced to forego their studies, and who benefit immediately from sensitive teachers, facilitators, and compassionate peers. For example, unaccompanied minors begin their adult lives without a supportive community, and because of this, integration services for young individuals are particularly essential. Finally, very few resources are available regarding the narratives and needs of individuals f eeing their countries because of gendered violence or sexual orientation, and this project provides a unique contribution to the understanding of LGBTQ refugee concerns.

YOUTH WITH REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Several of the participants involved in our projects were the sisters, brothers, or children of refugees. For this reason we often use the term *youth with refugee experience* to include those who may not technically have applied as a refugee but were touched by a refugee experience. The stories of uprooting and rerooting told by youth from Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Haiti, Sri Lanka, and other countries address migration, family, home, adversity, and change, themes that are relevant to all of us.

WHY ENGAGE IN A PARTICIPATORY MEDIA PROJECT?

A participatory media project can provide many benefits to an individual or community, but it does involve a lot of work. We suggest that before taking on the challenge of a participatory media project, you consider your specific goals.

Are you hoping to:

» *train individuals in new technical skills?*

» *strengthen language and writing skills?*

» *offer a class or community group a new way to collaborate?*

» *introduce media literacy concepts and skills?*

» *foster team-building?*

» *develop leadership skills?*

» *integrate finished work into an advocacy or educational campaign?*

While a media project can indeed meet many of these goals, knowing what is most important in advance will help shape your program and determine who else will be involved and in what capacity.

WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY MEDIA?

Participatory media has become a bit of a catch-all phrase for media creation and exchanges that challenge divisions between audience and creators, such as mashups, wikis and more. For this project, we use the term to describe a process that involves individuals in the creation of their own personal narratives.

The process offers individuals who are often misrepresented in mainstream media a chance to find their voice, develop new skills, and become storytellers, filmmakers, or photographers. The process is about reclaiming voice and representation and involves ethics, advocacy, and collaboration.

While new media tools are the current rage, participatory media practices have a long history. Some of the earliest participatory projects date back to the Challenge for Change program of the 1960s, a participatory film and video project of The National Film Board of Canada. PhotoVoice, a project originating in England and now a method practiced around the world, greatly expanded the field of participatory photography projects (see Chapter 3).

More recently, technologies of mobility (cell phones, GPS mapping devices, etc.) are presenting new opportunities to both creators and audiences. In place-based media, neighbourhoods and surroundings can become visual or auditory prompts for digital storytellers. Exciting opportunities also exist for audience members who can

walk in the footsteps of the storytellers through actual guides or with the support of mp3 players, GPS technology, and smart phones.

The possibilities for participatory and place-based media are indeed exciting, and at the same time, the technology is only a small part of a participatory media process. The tools selected for a project should be adapted to the group involved and should remain available to participants once the workshop is over. We often chose to use free, open-source technology to ensure that participants could access the software programs at any time after the sessions (visit our website for tips and tools).

A collaborative creative process, regardless of the technology utilized (still cameras, video, audio, digital mapping technologies, etc.), provides an opportunity for individuals to reflect on how their personal narratives are connected to larger social concerns.

A participatory process also offers participants a say in how the work is presented and distributed. We believe that participation should take place at every phase of the project – from initial planning, to recruitment, to the development of goals, to production, and dissemination. This form of shared authority and involvement is key to building relationships founded on trust and mutual respect.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR WORKING WITH INDIVIDUALS WITH DIFFICULT STORIES:

» *Warn participants before any workshop that creative projects can bring up difficult emotions.*

» *Offer participants resources they can turn to, should they need additional support.*

» *Explain to participants that as a teacher or facilitator, it is your responsibility to seek additional support if you feel the individual is at risk in any way.*

» *Be respectful of participants' privacy and be sure to offer a wide range of exercises so that they do not feel obliged to share stories if they are not ready.*

» *If any individuals are in the midst of refugee application processes, consult with their lawyers before sharing their stories with a wider public.*

» *Involve community members who are offering direct support to your participants in your workshops to help develop an environment of trust.*

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Mutual respect and shared ownership served as our guiding principles. The list below, developed by Michele Smith and Liz Miller for working with aboriginal and refugee youth, provides an ethical framework for setting up similar participatory projects. Guidelines are particularly important when working with communities that have struggled with past traumas, or those that continue to struggle with the preservation of knowledge and identity.

Community-initiated *Community members are involved from the outset in the project design, development of parameters and focus areas, and distribution goals. Ideally the project is initiated by community members with the media facilitator brought in to assist group members in realizing their goals.*

Shared Authority *The participatory media project is a joint venture between the participants and the media facilitator. They may have different roles within the process, but they are considered to be equal partners with an equal say in how the project will unfold.*

Shared Goals *The goals and objectives of a project are determined at the project outset with the community members and participants. Is the purpose of the project to impact policy? Strengthen an advocacy campaign? Build membership? Foster knowledge preservation? Project goals will help determine the type and scope of dissemination efforts.*

Shared Ownership and Authorship *The project is jointly owned. Participants co-own the final product and have shared control over the distribution of both their knowledge and representation. Community or traditional knowledge is honoured and shared throughout the process, and a project may involve multiple authors. Ideally co-ownership and co-authorship are formalized in a contract.*

Individual vs. Collective Participation and Impact *Often the broader community in question, beyond the individual participants, will have a stake in the project process and outcome. This entails finding a meaningful place for community members, advocates and service providers to be involved in the project. This also involves finding balance between the needs and goals of individual participants and the broader community.*

Many of these principles are challenged and pressed as they bump up against the messiness and politics of collaboration. Group dynamics, individual limitations, access to resources, past and ongoing injustices, and the institutions with which we may be embroiled all have an impact on how a project will unfold. Navigating this terrain of contradictions and inconsistencies involves being prepared to negotiate and renegotiate terms and parameters over the course of a project.

PARTNERS

The narratives featured in this book are the result of unique collaborations between community organizations serving and representing refugee groups in Montreal, advocacy and educational experts, and two Montreal-based research projects originating at Concordia University: **Mapping Memories** and **Life Stories of Montreal**.

EDUCATION

Mapping Memories was a four-year, government funded participatory research-creation project based at Concordia University that explored how personal stories and a range of media tools (video, sound walks, mapping, photography) could empower and bring the voices and the experiences of refugee youth in Canada to the larger public. Liz Miller was the Principal Researcher on this project (www.mappingmemories.ca).

Life Stories of Montreal, a five-year university and community oral history initiative, is collaborating with refugee communities to record their own life stories in order to build understanding about Montrealers displaced by war, genocide, and other human rights violations. Mapping Memories initiated a refugee youth working group within this unique community/university collaboration to ensure a youth perspective and to adapt the form of the Life Story so that youth would be inclined to participate. The project is based at the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, with Principal Researcher Steve High (www.lifestories.org).

Shaping Education: **Making Media Literacies** was also involved in the design of workshops and helped us to explore how these stories and projects would be integrated into classrooms around the country. The Executive Director of the group is Michele Luchs.

DIRECT SERVICE ➡

For each project we partnered with a host organization, which provided direct services to youth with refugee experience. By offering guidance and support to participants throughout each project, our community partners provided the essential ingredient to any participatory project, the 'trust factor.'

POLICY

The Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) is a non-profit umbrella organization committed to the rights and protection of refugees in Canada and around the world, and to the settlement of refugees and immigrants in Canada. They have initiated a youth network on refugee and immigration issues across Canada. In addition to providing contacts and resources, the CCR helped us position personal stories within the larger framework of refugee rights. Our principal collaborator at the CCR was Communication and Networking Coordinator Colleen French (www.ccrweb.ca).

OUTREACH

LEARN, a non-profit organization that offers innovative programs to Anglophone teachers and students across Quebec, is working with Mapping Memories to train youth participants in workshop facilitation and to organize school visits in different parts of the province.

Project Refuge *(Chapter 1), a temporary residence for newcomers.* www. montrealcitymission.org

YWCA of Montreal *(Chapter 2), an organization dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls.* www. ydesfemmesmtl.org

Côte-des-Neiges Youth Centre (*Chapter 3), a centre that provides youth with various art-based activities.* www. mdjcdn.wordpress.com

Express *(Chapter 4), a support group for LGBTQ Youth Refugees in Toronto.* www. soytoronto.org

AGIR *(Chapter 4), a LGBTQ support group in Montreal.*

www. agir-quebec.info