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8 More Than Words: Co-Creative Visual Ethnography

8.1 Introduction

The way I write is who I am, or have become, yet this is a case in which I wish I had instead of words and their rhythms a cutting room, equipped with an Avid, a digital editing system on which I could touch a key and collapse the sequence of time, show you simultaneously all the frames of memory that come to me now, let you pick the takes, the marginally different expressions, the variant readings of the same lines. This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning. (Didion, 2005, p. 7)

This chapter explores the development of a shared, visual ethnographic practice with newcomer communities in Ireland. Using more than words to find meaning, research practitioners considered the multiple frames of their audio-visual narratives—“the marginally different expressions, the variant readings of the same lines.” They edited their audio-visual stories—collapsing and re-opening the sequence of time, selecting images, determining the shot length, the camera movement, and the dialogue and pacing between images. Over time, in this practice of inquiry through media production, participants—the majority of whom had no prior experience critically engaging with photography and video editing—developed diverse approaches to conceptualizing and representing their experiences as newcomers to Ireland. By considering the audio-visual worlds of lived experiences participants developed multi-layered representations of Ireland—immigrant representations of Ireland. Some participants developed their approach to photography through a realist paradigm—seeking visual evidence, interrogating asylum and migrant labor regimes, and forensically documenting their case while other participants developed more poetically interpretative approaches to their visual voice. John Berger (1984) writes that storytelling serves to accompany the storyteller. Given the precarious legal status of the people who participated in the research discussed in this chapter, and the fact that half of participants (as individuals seeking international protection in Ireland) were living in conditions of prolonged confinement and social and economic exclusion,²⁰ Berger’s notion of storytelling as accompaniment is particularly

²⁰ In many western countries, individuals (and their children) who seek international protection are housed in accommodation centers as they await a response on their claim for refugee status. In Ireland, a system of “Direct Provision” was introduced as an emergency measure in 1999. With the implementation of Direct Provision adult asylum seekers lost the right to work, study, and travel freely outside the country while awaiting a decision on their application for refugee status.

instructive. The research findings presented here suggest that the co-creative action of producing documentary media within a “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) can serve to accompany the storyteller by facilitating inquiry, learning, and advocacy. To develop a shared anthropological practice (Pink, 2011; Rouch, 1974; Rouch & Taylor, 2003; Stoller, 1992), certain research adaptations to the StoryCenter²¹ model (Lambert, 2013) proved to be necessary and productive. This chapter presents an overview of the documentary essays²² produced with migrant communities in Ireland, an outline of four key research adaptations, and an exploration of the subsequent development of a shared, visual ethnographic practice through the creative labor of two practitioners—Vukasin and Edwina²³.

8.2 Research Overview

Research occurred from July 2007 to April 2010, with follow-up interviews and public screenings between 2011 and 2012.²⁴ The methodology combined social documentary and arts practice (photography, creative writing, audio-visual editing) with critical pedagogy.²⁵ During a period of approximately five months for each workshop, participants engaged with their life stories through the development of short, first person documentary essays. In this way, participants had time to inquire into current circumstances and memories, and to develop their craft as emergent photographers, media producers, theorists and ethnographers in and out of the workshop site.

Under the new regime, individuals and families seeking protection are placed in privately run “accommodation centres,” or “hostels” most often in isolated rural areas. The Direct Provision scheme renders these individuals and families dependent upon the state’s provision of food, accommodation and weekly allowance of €19.10 per adult, and €9.60 per child per week. The system is critiqued as discriminatory, and detrimental to the mental health and wellbeing of people who are lawfully present in Ireland (Fanning, 2001; Free Legal Advice Centre, 2009; Irish Refugee Council, 2013; Loyal 2011).

²¹ Formerly the Center for Digital Storytelling: www.storycenter.org.

²² I consider “digital storytelling” as practiced within this project to be a genre of documentary filmmaking. Within this context, the audiovisual compositions created by research participants can best be described as documentary essays, but are also referred to as “digital stories,” “audiovisual narratives” and “audiovisual compositions.”

²³ Pseudonyms are used to protect participant researchers’ identities when necessary and requested. In the case of Vukasin Nedeljkovic, the legal name is used and granted with permission.

²⁴ Research was supported by an ABBEST post-doctoral fellowship, and a *Fiosraigh* research scholarship. Many thanks to research practitioners for their participation, and to the following institutions and organizations: the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), the DIT School of Media, the Forum on Migration and Communication (FOMACS), the Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice, Integrating Ireland, the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, and Refugee Information Services.

²⁵ Pedagogical considerations for this research project are indebted to the work of Cammarota, 2008; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2008; Fine, Weis, Centrie & Roberts, 2000; Greene, 1988; Guajardo, Guajardo & Del Carmen Casaperalta, 2008; and Moll, 1992.

Participants created over 250 photographs and drawings, and developed thirteen self-narrated, audio-visual stories. Upon completing their multimedia narratives, participants had the opportunity to screen the stories publicly in diverse venues, or “opt out” of public dissemination beyond the workshop site. The co-creative production of these stories constituted a means of inquiry in and of itself in which research participants learned fundamental elements of audio-visual production, and critically considered the embodied impact of migration policy through photography, creative writing, and audio-visual editing. In the process, research participants—seven women and six men from African (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Morocco, Nigeria, Zimbabwe), Asian (Bangladesh), Eastern European (Serbia, Ukraine), and Middle Eastern (Iran, Iraq) countries—documented their experiences as newcomers to Ireland. They interrogated the structural violence of asylum and migrant labor regimes, and created their own images and audio to document their lives as workers, parents, cultural citizens (Coll, 2010; Rosaldo, 1994), activists, and artists simultaneously adapting to and transforming a new environment. The following table provides an overview of the documentary essays with excerpts from each author and a short description of the videos created during the two workshop series.

Table 8.1: Documentary Essay Overview

Author>Title	Excerpt from documentary essay	Description
<i>Abazu One Day I Will Not Forget</i>	“Sometimes we don’t speak out because we feel inadequate, or because we think it won’t make any difference, or because we are told we shouldn’t. In my case, I had heard of racism before, but never imagined I would be a victim.”	Abazu, a respected elder in his home country, speaks to an interaction on a city bus that left him feeling “like a nobody,” and wonders how to effectively speak up against prejudice and discrimination as an asylum seeker.
<i>Abdel Abdel’s Story</i>	“The day I came to Ireland I thought my dream was coming true, but life is not always as good as you imagine. I was always looking for a better life. I wanted to do something for the people and the community.”	Abdel is originally from Morocco where he holds degrees in law and economics. He came to Ireland with a permit to work in the IT industry. Despite Abdel’s job performance, his employer failed to renew his employment permit and Abdel became undocumented.
<i>Edwina Edwina’s Story</i>	“I brought my son all the way from his home country so he could have a better education and a better future. I am not asking for handouts. I am willing and able to work, to contribute to this society and my family—something I have done all my life.”	Edwina discusses the workplace discrimination that led to the loss of legal status, and suggests policy recommendations that would make a difference in migrant workers’ lives.

Author/Title	Excerpt from documentary essay	Description
Evelyn <i>Crossing Over</i>	“I woke up this morning with a bit of ‘hot head’ and shivers, even though the room was heated. It is one of those days in Ireland when the sky empties her icy grains.”	Evelyn focuses on one day of life in an accommodation center to explore the psychological impact of living in the asylum system.
Farrokh <i>New Ways</i>	“What’s going on? What’s happening to me? I’m riding in an ambulance. My hand is broken. I’m wondering about the Farrokh I was, and the Farrokh I am now. I never expected myself to do something like this.”	Farrokh briefly narrates the reasons why he fled his home country of Iran, and details how the social and economic exclusion of life in the asylum system has negatively impacted on his life, his well-being and his sense of self.
Lyubov <i>Lyubov's Story</i>	“We have a tradition in Ukraine. If someone is leaving home for a long period of time, the mother gives you an <i>oberikh</i> , which is a symbol of happiness, goodness, health, and safe homecoming. It’s been four years since I had to leave my family, relatives, extended family, friends, work, and my home country.”	Lyubov was recruited from the Ukraine to work in the agro food industry in Ireland. Due to severe workplace exploitation she was forced to leave her job, and subsequently became undocumented. In her story she outlines the workplace exploitation that lead to her loss of legal status, the legal advice and support she found with the Dublin-based Migrant Rights Centre Ireland, and the hope she maintains that she will receive a work permit and be able to travel freely again and see her family.
Marie <i>Ray</i>	“It all happened so fast. We would have all been killed if we had not left. Your daddy escaped with you, and I was left with your brother and sister. I hoped and prayed that you were alive and safe. You were only two. You were just a baby.”	Marie speaks to her young son who stayed behind in Nigeria, and longs for family reunification after a traumatic separation.
Mona <i>I Have People I Have Left Behind</i>	“I left my family four years ago. I don’t like to remember the day I left home and the way I left. It is too painful. What I do remember every day are my kids. I always speak to them on the phone, but the communication back home is very bad.”	Mona hopes to receive humanitarian leave to remain, but worries she may never reunite with her children who remain in Liberia unless family reunification laws change.

Author/Title	Excerpt from documentary essay	Description
<i>Pierre An Ireland Called Ireland</i>	<p>“We settled on an island, an island called Ireland. I love how it sounds. However, we are experiencing how integration on this island is a long way away.”</p>	<p>Despite having received refugee status, Pierre wonders how he and his wife will create a future for their family if they cannot exercise their professions.</p>
<i>Rebecca Aduro Life</i>	<p>“Aduro life! What a life! <i>Aduro</i> is a Nigerian word for asylum seeker meaning ‘stand still.’ How true! I arrived in Ireland with mixed feelings. Happy I was safe yet sad about the separation from my family. I was enthused about building a new life. My excitement died down as I noticed the stigma attached to the word ‘asylum seeker.’ It’s even worse for female applicants of African origin.”</p>	<p>Rebecca interrogates the ways in which female asylum seekers from African countries are particularly stigmatized within the asylum system and society at large.</p>
<i>Susan Caged Escape</i>	<p>“It takes courage to leave one’s home, family and everything on a good day, how much more when one has to leave in a hurry, afraid for one’s life and loved ones? I never expected to have things handed to me on a platter but then, I didn’t expect the high level of disbelief that follows one around, especially when you come from my country, Nigeria.”</p>	<p>Susan outlines the social and economic isolation of the asylum system and takes comfort in her children and her memories from home.</p>
<i>Vukasin 69/851/07</i>	<p>“During the 90s some of my exhibitions were banned. As an artist I realized there was no freedom of speech. I got involved in the peaceful student movement against the Milosevic regime. I was abducted and detained several times and had to spend time in prison.”</p>	<p>Vukasin narrates the circumstances that lead him to flee his home country of Serbia, and the inadequate and debilitating conditions in the asylum center where he awaits an official response to his application for refugee status.</p>
<i>Zaman Zaman’s Story</i>	<p>“When I was a kid, my father used to tell me about lots of things. He told me about my future, how to be a good man like him, and so many things. Sometimes I felt bored. But my father worried about me.”</p>	<p>Zaman paid several thousand euros to come to Ireland on a valid visa to work for an IT company. Upon arrival in Dublin from Dhaka, Bangladesh, he discovered the IT company did not exist. In debt and without employment, he became undocumented. Zaman narrates a story about his love for his father, and what he thought he might gain through migration and would he found instead.</p>

8.3 Centering the Challenge of Rendering Visible and Audible: Inquiry Adaptations to the Digital Storytelling Method

To serve the needs of research participants, and to develop digital storytelling as a research method—a relatively new project within the social sciences²⁶—the following adaptations proved to be necessary.

8.3.1 A Longitudinal Workshop Format

Instead of the standard Center for Digital Storytelling/StoryCenter 1–3 day workshop timeframe, participants met weekly at a Dublin college over a half-year period. During the workshop, participants shared, discussed and developed their images, visual concepts, scripts and documentary essays. The inter-disciplinary seminar curricula drew from critical pedagogy, visual anthropology, and social documentary practice, and focused on scriptwriting, photography, and audio-visual editing. This approach combining practice and theory organically provided opportunities for visits outside the research site during which participants tested out ideas, documented the asylum centres, and developed their narrative and visual ethnographic practice.

A longitudinal approach facilitated greater opportunity to develop ethnographic relationships of trust and reciprocity and explore the possibilities of digital storytelling as a means of inquiry through media practice. Additionally, meeting once a week allowed time for greater integration of media arts learning, as well as emotional and intellectual breathing space. Outside the workshop setting participants had time to reflect on their stories, integrate workshop sessions, develop scripts, collect visual elements from family archives, and produce new images. On-going documentation of the process was conducted—in and out of the workshop site—through ethnographic field notes and photographs.

8.3.2 Valuing Practice and Artefact

In digital storytelling production there has been a tendency to place greater value on the workshop process than the finished artefact (Sanchez-Laws 2010). Due to time constraints, limited resources, and other challenges, school and community-based digital storytelling projects have most often produced artefacts with low production

²⁶ See for example, Alexandra, 2008, 2015a, 2015b; Brushwood Rose, 2009; Couldry, 2008; Fletcher & Cambre, 2009; Gubrium, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Hartley & McWilliam, 2009; Hull & Katz, 2006; Lundby, 2008; Meadows, 2003; Otañez, 2015; Pleasants & Salter, 2014; Poitras Pratt, 2011; Spurgeon et al., 2009.

values (poor sound recording, and limited attention to visual storytelling). Because asylum experiences are often rendered inaudible (Threadgold, 2006; Moreo, 2012) and increasingly disbelieved (Fassin, 2011), and because research participants expressed interest in impacting asylum and migrant labor policies through their digital stories, the finished artefact became as important as the process. To get voices heard beyond the workshop site, access to professional-level media production tools and instruction; collaboration with artists and media professionals; and broadcast-quality production values for the finished artefacts were considered ethical, and strategic aspects of the research design. This design element informed weekly curricula and practice, in and out of workshop site, as participants determined what they would, and would not, reveal and/or conceal, and made on-going dialogue about visibility, “veracity,” “evidence,” and ethics necessary.²⁷ Upon completion of the stories, participants had the opportunity to screen them publicly in diverse venues, or opt out of public dissemination. Currently, ten stories are available for viewing on line.

8.3.3 Valuing Sound

Digital stories most often depend on the filmmaker’s voice to orient the viewer, and organize the video, and an expressive musical sound track most often accompanies the voice. In the standard workshop setting, there is little time to consider the musical selection, and not always enough time and/or skill to effectively execute the mix. This can result in the music competing with the recorded voice-over, or not being in conversation with the spoken narrative. This project focused on the primacy of the research participant’s spoken words, images and voice. Therefore, no music was added to the audio tracks. Instead, the listener is invited to hear the in-breaths and the pauses between the words. Ambient sounds were added during post-production. These sounds were not synchronous, but had an indexical link to the image in the video—for example, the sound of a heavy, institutional-sounding door closing in Evelyn’s video, *Crossing Over*. For future projects, there is much to explore in relation to ambient sound gathered on site by research practitioners, and rich possibilities for sonic ethnography.

8.3.4 Thinking With and Through Images: Visual Ethnography

Among media and education scholars who analyze or conduct research involving digital storytelling there appears to be a significant and persistent oversight regarding the incorporation of social documentary and arts practices, specifically the role of audio-

²⁷ For discussion on ethics in digital storytelling, see Hill (2014).

visual practices in facilitating inquiry. Meanwhile, until very recently, digital storytelling has largely been absent from the visual anthropology literature. To some degree, this is reflected in the way digital storytelling is most often practiced. The dominant paradigm in digital storytelling production has been for storytellers to present their story first in the “story circle,” and subsequently begin the production process with the written script. Starting with the written script can run the risk of developing a primarily illustrative engagement with the visual. For example, when I first began facilitating digital storytelling workshops the curriculum that guided our work did not include careful consideration of photography, nor sufficient time for making images within the workshop schedule. Participants therefore drew almost exclusively from on-line stock image banks and archival family photos. To my mind, this approach limited the interpretive possibilities of the story, and often resulted in visual storytelling that was primarily illustrative, or evidential. During the story circle, people who were new to audio-visual storytelling shared emotionally evocative, thoughtful, humorous and insightful stories. Because there was little consideration of the visual, the stories created in the workshops privileged the oral statement of the story more than the visual statement. For me, as a viewer/listener, this approach often resulted in an unsatisfying trace of the original storytelling performance. What might practitioners encounter, or learn from their stories if they had more time to explore the visual worlds of their oral and written narratives? Might some storytellers want to begin the inquiry and production process with their images? How might a dialogical engagement with the visual be encouraged?

These questions fostered a commitment to facilitating a process in which participants would critically engage with documentary methods by creating their own visual content to explore and depict their stories. Rather than use stock images from image banks, participants would think through and with images to make meaning of their stories and to document their experiences of migration. Instead of understanding images solely as tools for eliciting information, or data and evidence of “what really happened,” images were conceptualised as meditational objects (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Hart, 2004) that facilitate inquiry (MacDougall, 2006: 224) and allow for analytical and poetic engagements with experience (Edwards, 1997). In order to develop this aspect of the practice, more workshop time was dedicated to thinking about the role of images, to making images individually and collectively, and to discussing and critiquing those images. To this purpose, participants played mentorship roles by sharing their photographs with the group, and professional photographers visited the workshop site to discuss their approach to documentary photography. In this way, participants were supported as emergent photographers ethnographically documenting their everyday lives. When invited, I also visited participants in their homes and at the direct provision²⁸ centres where they lived in

28 At the time of the research, seven participants were living in the “Direct Provision” accommodation hostels and centers located throughout Ireland.

order to develop a participatory, visual ethnographic practice. These considerations supported research participants in creating their own images, actively considering the visual worlds of their stories, and employing photography as a form of inquiry. In the following section we will consider these themes through the work of two research practitioners – Vukasin Nedeljkovic and Edwina.



Figure 8.1: “Now I live in the Ballyhaunis Hostel where I am waiting for refugee status.” Screen shot from 69/851/07 (2009) written and directed by Vukasin Nedeljkovic. Vukasin photographed a surveillance camera inside his asylum center.

8.4 69/851/07

During the period that research was conducted, Ireland had one of the lowest acceptance rates for asylum applications in the European Union.²⁹ At the time of the second workshop, only two research participants had been granted refugee status. All other participants were waiting for a decision on their application for refugee status, or their appeals for subsidiary protection or humanitarian leave to remain. Vukasin was among the participants awaiting a decision. He is a Serbian artist born and raised

²⁹ Based on Eurostat online data, between 2008 and 2012 Ireland had one of the lowest acceptance rates of asylum claims for international protection in the European Union. During the third quarter of 2010, for example, 1.3% of asylum applicants received refugee status (Albertinelli, 2011).

in Belgrade who fled to Ireland in the spring of 2006. Following is a portion of the script that he developed during the seminar:

During the 90s some of my exhibitions were banned. As an artist I realized there was no freedom of speech. I got involved in the peaceful student movement against the Milosevic regime. I was abducted and detained several times and had to spend time in prison. After the revolutionary changes in 2000 the new government came. With time I realized that the so-called democratic government didn't change what we were fighting for all those years. They weren't even able to expel Serbian war criminals to The Hague. I recorded a speech against the government on Belgrade B92 radio. I said that our political leaders belonged in the Natural History Museum instead of being part of the EU Parliament. The reactions to my speech were really strong and it was the subject of Serbian parliament and headlines in all the daily papers. One of the political leaders said that I should go to prison for five hundred years. Very soon after that the soldiers came to my house to recruit me for military service. It wasn't safe for me to stay in Belgrade anymore. I had to leave. I fled Serbia and came to Ireland seeking political asylum in April 2006. After a few months in Ireland I began to feel very afraid to go outside. Even to buy food. I felt really lost and lonely.

To develop his visual narrative, Vukasin employed twelve colour images from an accommodation centre in County Mayo, one family photo of his mother from his personal archive, and a get-well card he received while in hospital in Ireland. During a workshop to discuss his photographic practice, Vukasin shared these images with fellow practitioners. Sharing his documentary images from the accommodation centre Vukasin described a “200-year-old building that is cold, drafty, mould-infested and leaks constantly” (field notes November 24, 2008). Vukasin made all but two of the images from inside the hostel, in the present tense, and yet these images narrate the past—Vukasin’s story of activism in Serbia, and his exile to Ireland. The opening sequence for his documentary essay is based on a photograph of running shoes smudged with blood (Figure 8.2). Vukasin explained that one of the people in his “accommodation centre” had been in a car accident, and Vukasin documented the moment by taking a photo of the man’s running shoes. In re-positioning the photograph within his audio-visual composition, **69/851/07**, Vukasin re-purposed the photograph, connecting it to his past as an activist. He explained that the photograph came to represent “the peaceful protests, the endless walks and the beatings we received” (field notes November 24, 2008).

The sole present tense sentence of Vukasin’s script is the very last, which reads, “Now I live in Ballyhaunis Hostel where I am waiting for refugee status.” In his audio-visual composition, Vukasin couples this last statement with the image of a surveillance camera (Figure 8.1). As he explained, “There are 16 cameras at the hostel. They represent the loss of freedom and privacy and the system of control and surveillance in operation at the hostel” (field notes November 24, 2008). Vukasin’s photographs and the discussion of his practice served as a model that encouraged other practitioners to document and interrogate the asylum system through the lens of the camera. The majority of the photographs from *Living in Direct Provision: 9*

Stories workshop series were taken from within the walls of the asylum centers where asylum seeking women and men, and their children, live while awaiting a verdict on their petition for refugee status. These photographs document the detention centers—a bunk bed, mold in the corners of the ceiling, surveillance cameras—the details of institutionalization, disrepair, boredom, socio-economic exclusion and poverty. By finding and making these images, participants explored their daily lives photographically. The resulting photographs served as a means to critically consider and document the material and emotional realities of living in the asylum system. This practice provided an opportunity to ethnographically examine the physical contours of the detention centers, as well as the invisible, internal landscapes of experience.



Figure 8.2: Runners. Screen shot from 69/851/07 (2009) written and directed by Vukasin. “In the ‘90s some of my exhibitions were banned.”

In 2009, Vukasin received subsidiary protection to remain in Ireland and later, Irish citizenship. He continues to photographically document the asylum system in Ireland and is currently a Ph.D. student developing practice-based research into the asylum system. About his research Vukasin writes, the “Asylum Archive originally started as a coping mechanism while I was in the process of seeking asylum in Ireland. It’s directly concerned with the realities and traumatic lives of asylum seekers. Its main objective is to collaborate with asylum seekers, artists, academics, and civil society activists, amongst others, with a view to create an interactive documentary cross-platform online resource, which critically brings forward accounts of exile, displacement, trauma, and memory,” (<http://www.asylumarchive.com>).

8.5 Sensing Stories to Find Images

When participants struggled with making images, having a community of practitioners with whom to discuss their developing craft was essential. Boiling ideas/feelings/moments down to an essence assisted the inquiry process. Questions like, what color is the idea/feeling/moment? What does it sound like? What does it taste like? Which objects and places evidence or evoke that moment/feeling/idea? Where can the image be found? These questions supported participants in developing a sensorial space for stories, and within that space photographs could be made. Participants considered how to visually represent different themes in their stories—the courage of leaving home and family; comforting memories of loved ones; feelings of isolation, loss and grief; expectations, longings, and hopes for new beginnings; stigma, prejudice and race-based discrimination; uncertainty and boredom; love and concern for family; a governmental policy that restricts asylum seekers from working, studying, or living autonomously; and the fear and sense of helplessness of living without legal documentation. These themes presented a series of new questions. For example, how to tell a story that is located in the past or any other place one cannot physically return to? How is a memory visually evoked? How can the storytellers protect and maintain their anonymity in an auto-ethnographic, audio-visual story? These are precisely the questions that research participants faced as they shaped their narratives. The questions provided participants with opportunities to move beyond the evidential and to explore diverse ways of depicting their stories. In the process, photography facilitated a poetic engagement with past and present experiences.

8.6 Edwina's Story³⁰

Edwina had travelled to Ireland with hopes of building a better future for herself and her family—professionally and educationally. She left the economic and political turmoil of her home country of Zimbabwe in 2000, and came to Dublin with a valid permit to work. She had learned about Ireland as a young girl attending missionary school, and proudly identified Irish ancestry in her family lineage. Her older sister had immigrated to the United Kingdom, and when Edwina's country was “going through some tough times and getting worse,” the opportunity to work in Ireland seemed a viable option for her, and her son. Edwina writes:

³⁰ The context and background of *Edwina's Story* is also discussed in my forthcoming book chapter, *Re-conceptualizing Digital Storytelling: Thinking Through Audiovisual Inquiry* (Alexandra, Forthcoming), which explores the connective tissue between digital storytelling and documentary filmmaking.

As a single parent, I wanted a better life for my son and myself. We came to Ireland leaving family, friends, and venturing into the unknown. Scared but excited, and not knowing what lay ahead for us.

In her documentary essay, Edwina details the workplace abuse, intimidation, and unjustified dismissal that lead to the loss of her work permit, and the beginning of her experiences as an undocumented migrant. She writes,

I had been in Ireland for about 3 years and worked first as a cleaner then as a Manager but I was being verbally abused by member of staff and unfairly treated at work. I worked 6 days a week, 12 hours a day even when I was sick with no break and just a sandwich, which I ate while working. The boss said they could not afford another person. When I complained to the Employer I would always be told that my work permit would be up for renewal. This was to silence me. All things came to a head when I joined the Union. They assisted me when I was told to resign or be fired. I then became undocumented and this was the beginning of a runaway roller coaster nightmare.

Edwina discusses the impact of living without legal documentation, and suggests policy changes that would improve circumstances for migrant laborers. She writes,

Living on the edge, stressed out, looking over my shoulder and feeling like a criminal. Any knock on the door, any Gardai³¹ sirens and I would cringe nervously waiting for the axe to fall.

The Bridging Visa, and more action against employers who abuse their work permit power could be the answer to this roller coaster nightmare.

Being undocumented means losing a part of your life. My dad just turned 80 and I couldn't go to his surprise birthday party. Having raised my 7 siblings and me when my mom died, he has been the most important person in my life.

I brought my son all the way from his home country so he could have a better education and a better future. I am not asking for handouts. I am willing and able to work, to contribute to this society and my family—something I have done all my life. Being documented will mean getting my life back on track, like a bright light at the end of a dark and scary tunnel.

Edwina's audio-visual composition does not visually illustrate the workplace discrimination and abuse discussed in her narrative. But, rather, she visually evokes a story located in the past, in an office she can no longer return to, in the present. To evoke this past, she documented her everyday life in Dublin. When we first began discussing her visual script, Edwina focused on evidential images. The first images for "My country was going through some tough times and getting worse," depicted a nearly empty cupboard (Figure 8.3), economic graphs, and collages she constructed from official documents and other objects (Figure 8.4). Graphs and photographs

³¹ *An Garda Síochána*, commonly referred to as the *Guardaí*, is the Irish police force.

of official documents performed the role of providing evidence of Edwina's lived experiences as she spoke to a public that disbelieves the legitimacy of migrant experiences (Valentine & Knudsen, 1995).



Figure 8.3: One of the first images Edwina took to visually represent “my country was going through some tough times and getting worse.”



Figure 8.4: Edwina created a collage to represent the challenges she faced as a migrant employee dependent upon her employer –a government work permit application, a carrot, and her written text.

During the seminar, Edwina shared the first visual approaches to her story, and participant/practitioners considered her images. Some participants found these initial photographs confusing and un-dynamic. These first images played an important role in documenting the story, but when coupled with the poignancy of

Edwina's voiceover, they detracted from the narrative. Based on this feedback from the group, Edwina decided to continue her photographic investigation and develop more options. She began taking photographs daily, and looking for images from her present-day life that might provide the evidential "proof" she was seeking (Field notes 6 October 2007). Through this visual exploration of her story, she began to develop more evocative, and at times, metaphorical and ambiguous images.

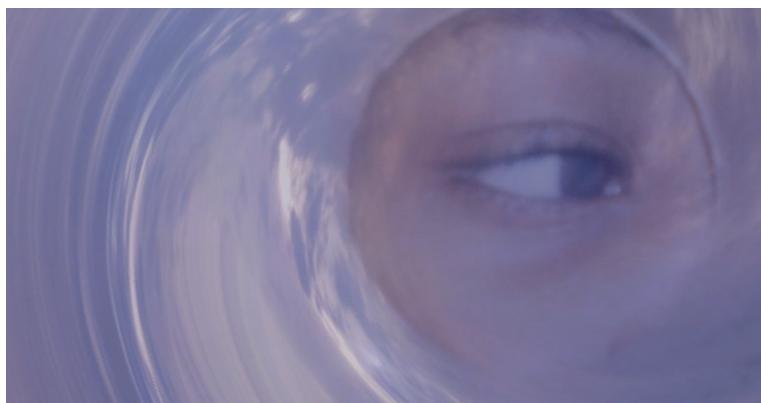


Figure 8.5: "I then became undocumented and this was the beginning of a runaway rollercoaster nightmare –living on the edge, stressed out, looking over my shoulder and feeling like a criminal. Any knock on the door, any Gardaí sirens and I would cringe nervously waiting for the axe to fall." Screen shot from *Edwina's Story* (2007).

Edwina started by creating a series of images that navigated the physical interiors and emotional landscapes of her story. Instead of presenting images from her home country to visually express the factors that influenced her decision to migrate, the opening sequence of Edwina's digital story reveals two point of view shots from her apartment building in North Dublin. These two photographs in sequence situate the viewer in the physical space where Edwina spent much of her time after becoming undocumented—afraid to venture out of her apartment and into the city where she feared she might be apprehended and deported. Edwina combined these interior shots with more impressionistic, and associative images—birds in flight (Figure 8.6) and rolling clouds—to create tension between the underlying themes of injustice, and self-determination in her story. She staged visual re-enactments of her story on the body—an open palm, a worried gaze (Figure 8.5), and hands in prayer position bound with rope, which is the most literal image in her series of self-portraits. To evoke her feelings of imprisonment, and her desire for social justice, she juxtaposed these self-portraits with everyday objects—a laundry basket that serves as an impenetrable barrier (Figure 8.6) and a cardboard kitchen roll and tea light that figure in her image of the "light at the end of the tunnel." Edwina's images provoked a resonant response

from other workshop participants. Perhaps most importantly, the images establish an intimate connection to Edwina and the story she crafted, while maintaining a degree of anonymity that felt comfortable to Edwina (Interview, 20 January 2009). Echoing Joan Didion's idea of needing more than words for inquiry and expression, Edwina observed that the process of producing her own photographs, and of editing her story gave her "more power" in expressing her experiences and arguments "than words alone." She stated, "I felt empowered by the photographs, by making them. It gave me more power in expressing my feelings than the words alone." (Interview, 20 January 2009). In 2015, Edwina received Irish citizenship.



Figure 8.6: "The bridging visa and more action against employers who abuse their work permit power could be the answer to this roller coaster nightmare." Screen shot from *Edwina's Story* (2007).

8.7 Conclusion

This co-creative documentary practice—making images, audio-visual authoring and editing—not only served purposes of creative expression, but also of analysis and advocacy. This approach to digital storytelling served as a means to accompany migrant participants as they navigated institutional barriers to personal and public participation, belonging and well-being. Overall, the collaboration resulted in two series of broadcast quality digital stories—*Undocumented in Ireland: Our Stories* and *Living in Direct Provision: 9 Stories*. These documentary essays have played a role in migrant rights discourse and public policy. For example, the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) used the stories from the *Undocumented in Ireland: Our Stories* series as part of their Bridging Visa Campaign, a successful labor rights initiative for migrant workers. The series have also been screened before diverse audience members (including former President Mary Robinson), at community forums on

asylum policy and migrant rights, at the Irish Film Institute (IFI), and the *Guth Gafa* Documentary Film Festival, and at universities and public policy presentations locally and internationally. Ten of the digital stories are currently available for viewing on-line at www.darcyalexandra.com. The longitudinal and inquiry-based approach to digital storytelling offered a dynamic opportunity to develop a shared ethnographic practice building from the audio-visual. As discussed through select images, and in particular the work of Edwina and Vukasin, practitioners originated and edited their own source material as they documented and constructed life stories within a collective. The method served both as a means of engaged inquiry through media practice, and a process for facilitating voice and listening about issues that research participants determined through the stories they selected, the artifacts they created, and the exploratory and contextualizing dialogue that developed over the course of the seminar. It also raised complex questions about the limits of listening and key considerations regarding the politics of voice (Alexandra, 2015b). Given that every research site is distinct, and research participants have diverse needs, goals and circumstances, I am not advocating this particular approach as *the* model to be replicated. Rather, I am suggesting that as we continue to develop shared practices of inquiry through audiovisual media, we value the aesthetic affordances and challenges of engaging with audio-visual platforms and tools and that we conceptualize research participants not solely as "storytellers" but more fundamentally as emergent media producers and ethnographic documentarians of their lives. In this way, we value and honor research practitioners, and the embodied objects they create.

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