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Exploring the 'craftedness' of multimedia narratives: from creation to interpretation

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This paper emerges from a comparative study of two community-based multimedia storytelling projects in Toronto and Montreal, and the multimedia narratives participants produced in those projects. Following current scholarship in visual methods that acknowledges the significance for research of the medium's formal qualities, the authors offer the concept of 'craftedness' as one which might help researchers grapple with the significance of the processes of both creating and interpreting visual data. Through a study of the visual data produced in these two projects, they examine three qualities of this aesthetic experience captured in the notion of craftedness, which seem to both complicate and enable processes of self-representation and interpretation: aesthetic distance, visual excess and the visualisation of the unrepresentable. Taking seriously the craftedness of multimedia works highlights the complexities of interpreting visual data and the dilemmas of representing ourselves and others.

INTRODUCTION

In our comparative study of community-based media projects and the multimedia narratives participants produce, we have been grappling with the complexities of interpreting visual and multimodal data, and the questions such complexities raise. Like many researchers interested in such work, we have become curious about and critical of our own attempts to make meaning from media texts, such as digital stories and videos, produced by those engaged in these community-based programmes. We have been exploring the processes of interpreting the multimedia narratives of participants, taking into account the multiple dimensions of representation at stake. In particular, we are interested in how participants and facilitators of community-based media projects talk about both the process of crafting a multimedia story and their experience of these stories as crafted objects. In this paper, we look at several examples from our data, gathered in a comparative study of community-based multimedia storytelling projects in Toronto and Montreal, to consider how researchers who collect multimedia data might account for the 'craftedness' of the multimedia narratives they study as part of the meaning that can be made about them.

Our comparative study of community-based media projects began with the aim of understanding media production not only in terms of media literacy, but also as a process of self-representation and autobiography. As such, we have approached these projects and the multimedia narratives produced in them, not only as a source of empirical data, but as reflecting processes of creation and self-representation through which complex and contradictory meanings and experiences are revealed. Our interest in visual data as crafted (rather than self-evident) and as aesthetically complex resonates with many conversations already happening in the field of visual methods (Luttrell and Chalfen 2010). Most researchers using visual methods would agree that it is not only the content of visual data that matters, but also its aesthetic qualities, if those can indeed be separated at all. For example, understanding the meanings contained in a photograph requires an attention to the aesthetic qualities of the image and the choices participants make in the crafting of that image, not just the content depicted. While such theoretical and methodological debates animate the field, we have observed that our complex understanding of visual data is often abandoned when time comes to interpret such data: even research into visual methods can tend towards an empirical understanding of images and multimedia narratives, which emphasises their content rather than their creative or aesthetic dimensions. In this paper, we are interested in exploring a set of ideas or vocabularies that can help us account for the meaning conveyed in the aesthetic experience of visual data. We look at this aesthetic experience in two ways: the experience of the participant crafting a multimedia narrative and the

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experience of the researcher encountering the narrative's 'craftedness'. Through our study of the visual data we encountered, we examine three qualities of this aesthetic experience posed by the notion of craftedness, which seem to both complicate and enable processes of self-representation and interpretation: aesthetic distance, visual excess and the visualisation of the unrepresentable.

The two sites of community-based media production where we conducted the research discussed here shared a commitment to documenting the stories of women and young adults impacted by immigrant or refugee experience, and in some cases socio-economically marginalised by systemic racism, poverty, forced migration and the impacts of globalisation. These programmes aimed to empower the participants through processes of representation, affirming their capacity to communicate their experiences to others and asserting the socio-political significance of doing so. In Toronto, we studied a year-long community-leadership programme for newcomer women, which incorporated media production in photography, sound and video, culminating in an extended digital storytelling process through which each of the participants made their own digital story.[1] In Montreal, we studied a participatory media project involving seven youth with refugee experience; the project began with a 12-week 'memoryscape' workshop, in which participants developed personal narratives tied to particular places. These 'memoryscape' narratives were shared on a city bus tour that visited the places of significance they addressed. The audio narratives were then transformed into digital stories, with images, and posted on the project website. We gathered data using a combination of research methods, including: observing and documenting pedagogical processes as participant-observers in each site; conducting informal, in-depth interviews with facilitators and participants; and collecting the multimedia narratives produced by participants, as well as various draft components of those final projects.

Our interviews with participants in both sites focused in large part on their experience of creating their multimedia narrative and asking them directly about the compositional choices they made during the various stages of production. In line with visual studies scholars like Radley (2010), who recommends an emphasis in the context of 'photo-production' rather than 'photo-elicitation', our study:

> [moves] from an interest in the meanings of pictures alone to an attempt to understand what has been made visible and why. (And, of course, which things have not been pictured, or have been left unclear – or are there for others to see but fail to be mentioned). (269)

In this paper, we employ the idea of 'craftedness' to signal our attention to these multi-faceted processes of production in the multimedia works participants created, and our dual concerns with process and product – the crafting of the story, as well as its status as a crafted object. 'Craftedness' describes how participants' experiences of creating multimedia narratives involve both aesthetics and technique, which are likewise part of the researcher's engagement with multimedia stories as data. We use aesthetics here to refer to the emotional or affective dimensions of representation which are cultivated through an attention to how a particular image or expression communicates experiences of beauty, harmony, dissonance, ambivalence and so on. We are interested in how these aesthetic qualities and experiences might act as further evidence of experience, contributing to our overall understanding of the meaning of the multimedia narrative, rather than calling the multimedia story's status as empirical evidence into question. How do we make sense of multimedia works that are both stories of individual experience as well as crafted artefacts?

INTERPRETING VISUAL RESEARCH

In the instances described here we are not ourselves conducting participatory visual research or using visual methods as a research method. However, as we grapple with interpreting data that is both spoken or written *and* visual, we find ourselves confronting many of the same dilemmas encountered by those who do participatory visual research: how are images meant to be read? What does the visual do that the verbal or written cannot? What is the relationship between voice and image? How should we interpret the visual stories participants produce?

In a recent special issue of *Visual Studies* (25.3), Luttrell and Chalfen (2010) identify these questions as central for researchers from a wide variety of disciplines who use visual methods and seek to understand visual data. When approaching the visual or multimodal texts produced by participants or collaborators in their various projects, each of the authors in this issue attempts to balance a kind of critical realism, which allows for the representation of experience in visual and narrative forms, with a sense that experience is neither immediately nor transparently available to us through such representations. In other words, a visual story may be contained in the image, but the visual story is not

self-evident – it requires interpretation – and thus making meaning from visual data is a negotiation that must be undertaken by the researcher. The editors ask, 'are [images] meant to "illustrate" or "complement" the text, or do they "speak" for themselves? How are images selected, for what audiences and for what purposes? What of the tension between aesthetic and documentary aspects of photographs?' (Luttrell and Chalfen 2010, 198).

This kind of recent scholarship on the complexities of visual methods, both for visual studies and for qualitative research, promises to profoundly enrich the discourse around community-based, participatory media projects where the implications of the form of the medium itself may be overlooked or downplayed (Low et al. 2012). Central to the mandates of many community-based media projects is to give participants, who are often identified as marginalised or 'at risk', the opportunity to tell their own stories and to find their own voices. This valorisation of 'voice' can often manifest itself as a commitment to 'authentic' social realism, which can forget the complexities of processes of representation due to the sense of immediacy provided by video, photographic or audio technologies (Low et al. 2012). Buckingham (2009) critiques what he calls the 'naïve empiricism' that undergirds the assumption that visual methodologies 'enable the subjects of research to express their views more directly, and with less interference or contamination from the researcher' (633). For example, in their study of the use of video diaries as a mode of self-representation, Chalfen, Sherman, and Rich (2010) suggest that the televisual presence of the camera and the formal qualities of the video medium had a profound effect on participant reports of their medical experiences. Indeed, they conclude, the medium itself might be seen to function as another participant in the research relation.

Kaare and Lundby (2008) also critique the notion, often at work in digital storytelling, of autobiography as seamless self-representation and argue, 'to play with narrative is to play with identity' (5); elsewhere Lundby (2008a, 2008b) observes that the Center for Digital Storytelling's slogan 'Listen deeply, Tell stories' can forget the constructed nature of the narrative. They suggest that digital storytelling be understood as a process of representation that, rather than offering transparent access to the participant's experience or voice, offers participants a method for experimenting with (re)crafting themselves. Likewise, Alexandra (2008) describes digital storytelling as a process through which storytellers mediate self-understanding. She contrasts this 'dialectic approach to storytelling that engages processes of remembering, meaning making and the re-constituting of lived experiences through the creation of a digital story' (103) with the kinds of testimonial approaches that are common in both academic and community-based settings.

In addition to discussing the ways in which visual and multimedia methods may mediate the experiences, stories and identities of participants in such projects, researchers are also exploring how visual methods mediate the meanings we encounter as data. There is a sense in much of the research on visual methods that visual or multimodal forms can bring affective qualities to social sciences research, which has primarily been understood as a domain of the cognitive or rational. In her photovoice study with brain injury survivors, Lorenz (2010) suggests that the medium of the photograph can actually make visible experiences that might not be expressed in any other way (210). She emphasises the work of photographs as visual metaphors of experience that 'bring emotions and life experience into the research conversation' (219). In another example, Luttrell (2010) describes how the children in her study use photography 'to express love, connection and solidarity; to show pride and self-regard; to seek and express aesthetic pleasure; to defend against negative judgement' (232). Similarly, Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2010) suggest that for the children in their study, their 'faith in the indexical qualities of a photograph merges with the communication of something less visible or immediate, with matters of experience and interpretation, as when their photography assumes a more expansive and reflexive character' (259).

In such ways, the field of visual methods is complicating many of the traditional notions undergirding participatory media projects. Rather than using visual media as a way to gain more direct or transparent access to participants' experiences, those theorising visual research methods understand the media themselves as structuring what can be represented of the self, both technically and aesthetically. At the same time, these scholars identify the interpretive work of the researcher as a negotiation, with both the work produced and its author: 'What a photograph can say and the voices it contains are always the product of negotiations between researcher and subject, rather than the communication of simple or self-evident truths' (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi 2010, 257). This demands that researchers 'make transparent our analysis of the communicative strategies made possible through picture-taking' and continue to discuss 'the production and analysis of voice(s) through visual means' (Luttrell and Chalfen 2010, 199). Our own research takes much of this scholarship as a starting

FIGURES 1 & 2. Najela.

point and asks how the 'craftedness' of the multimedia narratives produced by our participants matters. We explore three dimensions of this craftedness – aesthetic distance, visual excess and unrepresentability – which pose both challenges and possibilities in the creation and understanding of multimedia narratives.

AESTHETIC DISTANCE IN THE CRAFTING OF MULTIMEDIA OBJECTS

It is precisely the multiple modes of expression made available to participants that make multimedia technologies of such interest to community-based projects that aim to facilitate the production and representation of stories. However, the process can pose difficulties to participants – technical challenges but also those grounded in the experience of self-representation. For example, participants often have little experience constructing a visual narrative and get stuck when asked to find images that represent the story they are trying to tell. In the digital storytelling workshop we studied, facilitators worked quite hard to develop these skills among participants, offering workshop sessions exclusively on photography and discussing the nuances of visual narrative, including the difference between visual illustration and metaphor. One facilitator (Jane) described how she regularly tells participants, 'if this is your oral story, your visual story doesn't have to say the exact same thing.[2] It can go deeper. It can… change your story or make it more complex, depending on what you see' (interview, 17 March 2011). In an effort to push participants to think more creatively about their visual stories, Jane described how she and her colleague established a rule that prohibits participants' use of stock images from the Internet. She said, 'when they just hear that limitation now, set out for them, it then doesn't become the first place that they think [to go]. So I think it's opened up some more creativity' (Jane, interview, 17 March 2011).

In this way, the development of a multimedia narrative is at times very challenging for participants but also has the potential to open up new modes of self-representation. Najela, a participant in the digital storytelling workshop whose written narrative told the story of a violent childhood in Afghanistan, was initially at a loss about how to visually represent her experiences without any photographs of her own from that time. She was angry that the facilitators were not allowing her to use stock images, available on the Internet, of Afghanistan or violent conflict. The facilitators helped her to think about what images might capture her story in other ways, and asked her 'what would you have a picture of if you could go find it?' (Jane, interview, 17 March 2011). According to Jane, Najela responded:

> I want fire. I want to show these…burning buildings, [that were] so vivid in her memory of her childhood, and so [one facilitator] just said, Well, great, let's go outside and start a fire. And so they went outside and started a fire. (Jane, interview, 17 March 2011)

Najela was able to capture the image of the fire in photography and video, and went on to create her own symbolic imagery by layering these images with other photographs she took, of architecture, fencing, and locked gates she found at a local construction site (Figures 1 and 2).[3] In the end, she described the photography as her favourite part of the process.

Rita, a participant in the audio bus tour project, described in detail the choices she made in putting together the digital story version of her tale, which involved a series of collages that accompany her narration of a return with her father to his childhood home in Jaffa, Palestine. Although, like Najela, she found it difficult 'putting the pictures with the words', determining 'that suits that', and choosing from the 'tons

FIGURES 3 & 4. Rita.

of pictures', she found that collage was very helpful, and pleasurable, describing the creative process as 'magical' (Rita, interview, 11 March 2011) (Figures 3 and 4). It also helped her create a complex text; as she said, 'It gave like different dimensions to Palestine… I just wanted to show different aspects of it, that it wasn't monolithic' (Rita, interview, 11 March 2011). Many of the choices were aesthetic ones, and she marvelled in her interview at the eventual beauty of the tale and its multimedia form.

Part of the pleasure for Rita involved developing a kind of aesthetic distance, as she explains that she needed to step back from her own story:

> There was a time when my story was who I am…now that I see it, I find it is so beautiful, how wonderful that it can be used so no suffering can be duplicated. A contribution, rather than, 'I'm the victim'. (Rita, interview, 11 March 2011)

This involved a shift from 'this is what happened, [to] what do I really make of it, how do I work with it' (Rita, interview, 11 March 2011). For Rita, the power of the tale seems to lie in part in its affective impact and her role in creating this impact. She becomes an artist, in a sense, of a story that is more than just her own.

The way that participants speak about the experience of making these multimedia works and, indeed, what this reveals about the craftedness of any self-representation poses important question for us as researchers as we analyse and interpret these works as data. In particular, we are struck by the emotional and deeply personal dynamics that accompany the creation of these multimedia works, and the strong investments that participants make in the process of creative self-representation. It is clear from our interviews with participants that it is not just the perceived authenticity or direct correspondence of the multimedia stories they produce that is satisfying, but the fashioning or crafting of the stories, which requires a more self-conscious and creative process, and represents something else about themselves and their experiences that is pleasurable and satisfying. In this way, rather than seeing these multimedia narratives primarily as data gathered by the researcher, we view them first and foremost as something intentionally offered by the participants to each other, to the facilitators and to the world.

MORE THAN SHE CAN SAY: THE AFFORDANCES AND EXCESSES OF VISUAL DATA

In the crafting of multimedia narratives, participants give us access not only to parts of their life stories, but also to the story of their creative process and their process of self-representation. As we noted above, the process of self-representation through the crafting of such media is emotionally complex and at times fraught. Put simply, participants are often telling emotionally difficult stories but they are also negotiating, as we do whenever we tell a story, what to express in a given context and in what way. Furthermore, we are not always conscious of the negotiations that structure expression and, as such, Brushwood Rose (2009) observes that we might distinguish between what we express about the self and what we know. Indeed, the dynamics of self-representation are such that we may find it difficult to express something we know about ourselves and just as often we may express something we did not know in advance. In this way, we often learn something about ourselves through the narration of experience, whether in words or images or both. At the same time, as researchers we may learn something about others by observing how participants craft self-representations and how those self-representations express the complexities, ambivalences and surprises that accompany their production.

FIGURES 5 & 6. Amrita.

Amrita, a participant in the digital storytelling workshop whose story was in part about her experience of post-partum depression, composed a written narrative she described as 'very controlled' but which expressed a greater complexity of emotion through a series of drawings she used in her visual narrative. Through the process of the workshop Amrita was able to tell several unexpected stories, an experience she described as important for her as they were stories she had not told before. She was able to make choices about which of these stories she wanted to share and with whom. At the same time, her visual narrative offers a glimpse into what remains in excess of her digital story 'script'.

While Amrita articulated how important it was to tell the story of her struggle with postpartum depression to others in the workshop community, she also described how she made a choice to draft a different kind of script for her digital story, which she planned to share with her community: 'I was making a story for my community… I wanted to share my first digital story with everybody. So I thought I should put some things aside for later, and elaborate some more things' (interview, 29 March 2011). And yet the visual dimension of Amrita's digital story is evocative of more than she chose to 'say' in the final script. She made the unusual choice to hand draw the images she uses (most participants use photography or video) and the abstract quality of the images, which vividly deploy colour and a sense of motion, conveys an emotional depth that is otherwise obscured by her spoken narrative, which she herself describes as a 'controlled thing' (interview, 29 March 2011). In addition, Amrita used the 'pan' and 'zoom' functions in the digital editing suite to create layered representations of the drawings, which move in relation to each other, forming a kind of three-dimensional moving collage. The colours and forms in the drawings themselves, coupled with their moving and layered relation to one another visually represent a story that Amrita chose not to speak or write.

Amrita's voiceover in her digital story offers a largely factual account of the events that took place around the birth of her first child: she details her material conditions, and her decisions to travel back to India and then return to Toronto. She does not talk much about her feelings, although she tells us she suffered from postpartum depression and a lack of support. However, the visual narrative reveals a great deal of emotional content that effectively supplements her spoken narrative (Figures 5 and 6). It also offers a contrast in tone, revealing a depth of meaning in the digital story that is perhaps more than the sum of its parts. For example, while the spoken narrative offers a linear and detailed story of experience, and the images reveal an emotional content, the multimedia juxtaposition of these representations offers an additional field of interpretation in which Amrita's experience of both depression and self-representation might be characterised as ambivalent and uncertain.

Another participant, Satti, similarly used visual images and effects to represent an experience that is hard to put into words. In Satti's case, the visual dimensions of digital storytelling allowed her to represent the incapacity to speak, both as an event in her story, which is about her difficulty arriving in Canada unable to speak or understand English, and as an experience of telling that story. Satti's digital story describes her struggles and successes as a newcomer to Canada trying to learn a new language in order to gain greater independence from her husband, to better support her son and to access meaningful educational and employment opportunities. The complex experience of English language learning and the social and emotional difficulties posed by English illiteracy are common themes in the digital stories made by the newcomer women in Toronto. However, unlike many of the storytellers in her group,

Satti grappled with finding a way to represent the feeling of her experience – feeling disoriented, confused, unable to comprehend those around you – in a way that words did not allow.

In her interview, Satti described arriving for the first time in Canada and being unable to understand the immigration officer who asked her where she was from. Rather than using images of the airport, which she initially considered, Satti instead chose to visually explore how that moment felt for her: 'how should I show that I was confused when people they talk?' (interview, 15 March 2011). Satti's approach to this part of her digital story employs a rapid montage of close-up photographs of her face in various facial expressions. Her quick edits leave each image of her face on the screen for only a moment, and the rapid succession of facial expressions produces an experience of watching a lurching 'movie' of her face in motion. The effect is both intimate and vulnerable – she exposes her face, in what she herself describes as an unflattering way – and somewhat comical as she makes a series of 'funny' faces. As Satti argued, those faces show 'how [her experience] was silly, and at the same time it was sad' (interview, 15 March 2011).

Discussing this visual strategy in an interview, Satti compared her choice to use the montage of her facial expressions to the choice actors make when they wear prosthetics or change their appearance in a movie to 'be matched with that character in the movie' (interview, 15 March 2011). Satti seems to be acknowledging that the digital story is a contrivance or construction, much like the actor's prosthetic, and that the purpose of crafting such a story is to express something more than a purely factual account might enable. While a contrivance is usually understood as 'unreal', we suggest that in this case Satti understood herself as an author or artist crafting a digital story that could more fully reveal dimensions of her experience through her use of aesthetic strategies. In this way, the visual dimensions of Satti's digital story allowed her to achieve an authenticity that is akin to the emotional authenticity that cinematic storytelling aims for, and exceeds what can be conveyed in words alone.

A great deal of research in visual methods suggests that visual data makes new voices available to the researcher. For Amrita and Satti, this seems to be the case, as they work with drawing and photography to express strong and complex feelings that extend beyond and at times offer contrast to the textual narrative. However, these multimedia works can also complicate the researcher's interpretive processes, given the tension, for example, between the controlled story and intense but abstract images. In this way, multimedia forms and particularly their less transparent affective and aesthetic qualities can resist explanation and thus trouble or disrupt the processes of research, complicating and even contradicting the process of self-representation on which qualitative evidence relies. At the same time, visual methods and visual data pose unique possibilities for the researcher intent on making sense of the contexts and lives s/he encounters.

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION: VISUALISING THE UNREPRESENTABLE

The visual and multimedia also plunge the creator and interpreter into the politics, as well as the aesthetics, of representation. The stories told in the workshops are shaped by what participants feel they can and should show and tell. Sontag (2003) has discussed how the rise of photo-journalism has contributed to the cultural ubiquity of images of atrocity. The 'shock image' is 'part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value' (23), either for selling media news stories or generally drawing attention. Any project that promotes self-representation by populations likely to have experienced violence or displacement, as with the Montreal youth with refugee experience or the newcomer women in the Toronto project, is in danger of fostering a kind of voyeurism or armchair disaster tourism.

A reluctance to sensationalise seemed to have shaped the stories developed by the participants in the Montreal memoryscapes workshop; none of the digitals stories contain what might be described as images of atrocity. The stories almost all focus on family relationships in the context of histories of war and displacement or on what it means to build a life someplace new, rather than on the experiences of violence themselves. One young man who came to Montreal by himself at 18 as a refugee claimant from Zimbabwe offered a poetic meditation on arriving in a new place, raising questions about belonging and identity. A concept that seemed crucial for giving the project participants control over their representations was the distinction drawn by the facilitators between private and public stories; whereas a private story is one you choose to share with one person, a public story can be heard by everyone. This was extremely important for Lina, who at 4 years became the lone survivor in her immediate family of the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda, having hid with her brother in a banana plantation for 3 months. Lina described the notion of the public story as a relief, explaining that it meant 'there's no problem, I can share my story' (interview, 16 March 2011). While she had also been

interviewed at length as part of an oral history project, she reflected that she was happier with the public story she crafted for the bus tour project. Lina contrasted the two experiences by saying that in the first, the interview, 'they ask you questions then you answer. But the second one, you're the one, you write what you want. Then, they help you to remove what's not necessary, to add what's necessary' (interview, 16 March 2011).[4] While Lina does not define 'the necessary', her story seems to have the larger objectives of informing a public that includes her future children, because 'I want people to know what happened', and of offering inspiration and hope (interview, 16 March 2011). The notion of the public story conveyed to her that 'you write what you want' for a particular purpose, that you have control over the story so that it might do a certain kind of work in the world. The concept also seems to imply that there is a multiplicity of stories she could choose to show and tell (in contrast to the interview where 'they ask you questions, then you answer'). The life story becomes a mutable and creative space. Clear from the digital story she produced is that building aesthetic structure was also part of taking control; the tale explores the theme of two families, the one she lost and the one she has built with other orphans, and is elegantly structured around the idea that your world can be overturned in a short period of time, first 3 hours, then 3 days and then 3 months.

Despite the desire to craft a public story, which each of the participants in these projects must find, the politics of representation also pose the limit of both language and image for conveying an experience. What is unrepresentable takes many forms for participants engaged in producing multimedia narrative. Sometimes, one's experience is visually unrepresentable because there is a literal absence of images – participants migrate in moments of crisis in which personal documentation is lost or left behind, or they undergo experiences about which documentation is systematically repressed or destroyed. This is striking in the case of Lina's digital story with its paucity of images: the only two photographs she has of her family, and then a series of pictures taken of her from slightly different angles standing next to a window. The family photographs each appear once at the beginning of the narrative; the others are presented through a series of slow zooms and fades. She chose not to use any other photographs, such as stock images of Rwanda or any symbolic images (as Amrita did), to represent the horrific crimes she witnessed as a child or the experience of hiding with another child, her brother, for 3 months. The narrative is accompanied by very few sounds – a child crying, footsteps and the rustle of grasses. The whole is extremely powerful, with a spare eloquence and beauty that speaks to the inevitable inadequacy of representation to convey genocide, as well as of the power of the speaker as a survivor.

At other times, the ethical concerns of the storyteller, and the immediate politics of representing the self or others, make the crafting of a visual narrative particularly challenging. An example that emerged in the digital storytelling workshops we observed has to do with the commonly held assumption that participants would use images of themselves, and particularly their faces, in the stories they produced. For the Muslim women who participated, this was not an option for religious and cultural reasons, and yet these participants worked to find alternate ways to represent themselves in their own stories. In one instance, a participant asked someone to take some photographs of her hands while she sewed. In another, a participant photographed her clothing hung and draped over her bed. These images of hands and of clothing became an innovative form of self-portraiture inspired by the initial challenge of unrepresentability.

For another participant in the digital storytelling workshop, the process of making the digital story was itself inspired by her own difficulty 'seeing' the other and her growing awareness of the dynamics of misrepresentation. Ming first told a story about overcoming her prejudice and fear of those in her downtown neighbourhood who frequented the drop-in centre at a church she walked past every day. The drop-in centre serves many of the homeless people in her neighbourhood, all of whom are dealing with extreme poverty and many of whom are also living with physical and mental illness. Ming described her initial impression of the people she would see hanging out in front of the drop-in centre as dangerous and disturbing. She had been challenged by her peers in the workshop about these prejudices, and when the time came for her to conduct a community survey she recognised that this was a facet of her local community she needed to learn to address. Ming went to the drop-in centre and spent a great deal of time talking with the community members there. Ming described this as a transformative experience and decided to make her digital story about what she learned from the people she had encountered.

Ming described how the drop-in centre clients were very eager to talk to her and encouraged her to take photographs of them – they were keen to answer her questions and to share their own stories with her. However, Ming's experience of her own prejudice against the drop-in centre clients, in addition to her growing awareness of their socio-economic marginalisation and vulnerability, contributed to her

worry that they could be subject to misrepresentation. For this reason, Ming decided not to show images of individuals' faces in her story and yet, it is also clear from her interview that Ming approached her visual story as an author wanting to craft a particular narrative, rather than as a conduit for the experiences of others. She described a man she encountered who encouraged her to take a photograph of his smiling face. Instead, Ming crafted an image of his hands holding cards, because she felt his happy appearance contradicted her narrative about him and what he had told her:

> He's very happy [at] that moment… I say, okay I don't take the photo for his face because he's happy, it's not really inside. When he tells [me his] story he's really sad, he's always like, 'why [do I have] this life…?' (interview, 2 March 2011)

As researchers, Ming's digital story poses an interpretive dilemma, especially as we feel troubled by some of her own interpretive choices: how might we understand Ming's story about the experience of encountering the drop-in centre clients as a story that reveals something about herself, her place in the world and her own struggles with the politics of representation?

In each of these cases, for each of these participants, the craftedness of the multimedia work provided an opportunity to represent some aspect of experience that was not otherwise representable. For Lina, who was without access to her own visual history, as well as the Muslim women who could not produce traditional self-portraits, the multimedia story became an opportunity to explore new creative modes of self-representation and to craft new aesthetic forms. The visual pacing of Lina's digital story, like the juxtapositions in Amrita's, for example, offers a rich source of data for researchers who look beyond content to the meanings conveyed in the multimedia work's aesthetic properties. What more can we understand about Lina's experience by attending to the aesthetic experience her visual narrative produces? The crafting of the multimedia story is both motivated by the emotional and personal terrain of each participant, but also by the political dynamics of representing their social worlds. Considering the choices participants make in creating these multimedia narratives – why did Ming employ a picture of hands rather than a face? – as well as asking them about the experience of crafting such narratives can reveal a great deal about the personal as well as socio-political dynamics of representation.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the stories from these projects speak to the power and complexity of processes of multimedia self-representation, as participants grapple with the possibilities, challenges and pleasures of such things as symbolic expression, beauty, composition, narrative function and purpose, representing ambivalence and unrepresentability. In turn, they suggest that attempts to interpret them need to be sensitive to the signs of this grappling. Taking up multimedia narratives as crafted as well as empirical acknowledges that they emerge, not as direct or transparent reflections of experience, but as products of a creative and often imaginative process, which involves acts of invention, aesthetic choices and a significant amount of editing. A writing instructor who facilitated some of the workshops for the bus tour project described her role as writing teacher primarily as a listener. She described her listening process in literary terms, so that 'When the person is explaining what he or she wants to write, I pick up structures, I pick up forms or metaphors that are already in what they want to say' (interview, 16 May 2011). She focuses on word-choice, image and embedded genre patterns, offering her insights about their significance back to the teller. This directs our attention to the shape of the story, asking us to think in terms of its aesthetic qualities and how these reflect and possibly direct experience. Like the writing teacher, the researcher needs to be an excellent listener/reader/viewer, noting patterns and absences. Being a careful interpreter of multimedia data as crafted also means attending to its affective impact, asking, How does this make me feel? Why do I think it makes me feel this way? What aspects of this work surprise, or unsettle, or please me? What don't I understand? What seems to be missing? All of these strategies mean thinking about the work of interpretation as a question rather than a given, and grappling with the dilemmas of representing ourselves and others. As a result, we are not only concerned with what the content of these multimedia narratives may or may not tell us about the real lives of their authors and subjects, but also with the complexities of interpretation in the context of new aesthetic genres, practices and conventions.

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NOTES

[1] The digital storytelling model studied here is an adaptation of the model developed by the Center for

Digital Storytelling in California and documented by the Center's founder, Joe Lambert, in his book *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community* (2010).

[2] All names of participants have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

[3] All images included in this article have been used with the permission of the participants who created them.

[4] While this was the sentiment in her interview, project facilitators told us that a year later Lina was returning to Rwanda for the first time and bringing her extended interview, for it contained an account of her experience that she has never been able to share with some of her loved ones there. It seems clear that the different genres – digital story and oral history interview – can serve different and yet equally valuable functions.

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