Visualising Migrant Voices: Co-Creative Documentary and the Politics of Listening

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VISUALISING MIGRANT VOICES: CO-CREATIVE DOCUMENTARY AND THE POLITICS OF LISTENING

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A dissertation presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2015
Statement of Original Authorship

I certify that this thesis which I now submit for examination for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Abstract

This ethnography of media production explores the challenges of literally and figuratively visualising voice. The labour of a shared production and the distribution of the audio-visual documentary essays unfolded within a field of diverse, and at times, conflicting interests. For this reason, judicious attention to what I name ‘encounters’ of ‘political listening’ (Bickford 1996; Dreher 2009) provides one framework for theorising the challenges of researching with marginalised subjects and stories, and the contradictions of developing shared practices within proprietary contexts. These encounters reveal moments of listening and being heard, struggles over ‘veracity’ and ‘evidence,’ and the power relations inherent in the production of media about lives that are most often rendered invisible and inaudible. The research aimed to develop an exploratory and critical practice of inquiry that not only responded to the ethical complexities of research with refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants, but also created opportunities for research subjects to interpret, analyse and document their experiences as newcomers to Ireland. Within this community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1999), participants produced their own media to explore and document their lives as workers, parents, ‘cultural citizens’ (Coll 2010; El Haj 2009; Rosaldo 1994), and artists simultaneously adapting to and transforming a new environment. By centring participants from diasporic communities as the primary authors and co-producers of their audio-visual narratives, the research sought to extend and deepen the public discourse of migration in Ireland. Through the process, research participants—seven women and six men from African, Asian, Eastern European and Middle Eastern nations—interrogated their daily circumstances negotiating migration policy, and revealed the structural violence of asylum and migrant labour regimes. To develop a ‘shared’ anthropological practice (Pink 2011; Rouch 1974; Rouch & Taylor in Feld 2003; Stoller 1992), the research design introduced an
inquiry-based and longitudinal approach to the participatory media genre known as ‘digital storytelling’ (Lambert 2013). Digital storytelling as a research methodology is a relatively new endeavour (Alexandra 2008; Burgess 2006; Brushwood Rose 2009; Gubrium 2009; Gubrium & Turner 2010; Hartley & McWilliams 2009; Hull & Katz 2006; Lundby 2008; Meadows 2003). Due to the research design’s significant adaptations to the standard Center for Digital Storytelling model, ‘co-creative’ (Spurgeon et al. 2009) documentary practice is employed as a term that more accurately describes the labour at hand. The collaboration generated over 250 images and resulted in two series of broadcast-quality, audio-visual stories—*Undocumented in Ireland: Our Stories* and *Living in Direct Provision: 9 Stories*. Both series have screened before diverse audiences, at public forums on asylum policy and migrant rights, the Irish Film Institute (IFI), the *Guth Gafa* International Documentary Film Festival, and at scholarly conferences throughout Europe and the Americas. Eleven of the fourteen digital stories are currently available for viewing on-line. While research findings indicate the method facilitated dynamic opportunities for engaged inquiry into asylum and migrant labour regimes, recognition of storytellers and stories, and sustained encounters of “narrative exchange” (Couldry 2010), the practice raises complex questions about the politics of listening and being heard.
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Introduction

Growing up in the South San Francisco Bay Area, people often appraised my physical appearance and concluded with, ‘You must be Irish.’ Red hair. Freckles. Irish. The problem was, as an adopted person, I had little knowledge of my ethnic heritage. It bothered me that others assumed I was someone I wasn’t, based on something as random as the colour of my hair. I knew next to nothing about Ireland. What could it possibly mean to ‘be Irish?’ Soda bread, potatoes, and Irish stew? St. Patrick’s Day? Being Catholic, or drinking too much? All I had were stereotypes and clichés.

My family lived on the West Coast. We belonged to the Americas, and California belonged to Mexico until 1848. The mother of my first love was from Guadalajara. I learned Spanish, and became fluent in the language as a teenager. In fact, I spoke and lived almost exclusively in Spanish during some of the most formative years of my life. It became a mother tongue. The language I ran away to. The language I chose. But people were endlessly surprised by my fluency–after all, where was I really from? Wasn’t I Irish?

Perhaps it makes sense then–in some surrealistic twist of a story–that after studying and working in North, Central, and South America (US, Mexico, El Salvador, Argentina), I would receive a doctoral fellowship to conduct fieldwork in Ireland. The chance to study contemporary migration within the context of unprecedented demographic changes in Irish society was promising. I brought twenty years of experience working in trans-cultural contexts in the fields of human rights and education to the task.¹ I went with open eyes. I

¹ I began working in the field of human and civil rights in 1987 as an interpreter and community organizer with Central American Refugee Assistance, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, and the Native American Student Union. This work has included investigative research with the Salvadoran Association in Search of Disappeared Children (Asociación Pro Búsqueda) from 1994-1998, practice-based research as an adult educator at Pima Community College in the US-Mexico borderlands from 1998-2006, and ethnographic research with immigrant families as a research assistant to Dr. Iliana Reyes at the University of Arizona from 2005-2007.
would not seek to find ‘long lost relatives.’ I did not bring the courtroom adoption papers identifying me as ‘Baby Healy.’ But the first time I arrived at Dublin airport, and saw the large *Welcome Home* sign, I cried. It immediately felt foolish. Certainly *Bord Failte*, the Tourist Board, capitalises on this powerful pull—the promise and possibility of ancestors, known and unknown. Later, I learned that the *Welcome Home* sign was welcoming ‘home’ the largest number of migrants into Ireland–Irish women, men and children returning from the UK, Australia, and North America during the economic boom years known as the Celtic Tiger. But where was the *Welcome* sign for the ‘other’ immigrants?

In Dublin, people would sometimes ask if I was a ‘returned Irish,’ but most often, upon hearing me speak, people knew I was ‘American.’ Sure enough, I saw more redheads than ever before in my life, and quite often I noticed my very same mottled, melanin-impaired skin (albeit with less sun damage) on the bodies of complete strangers. Yet these physical similarities served to emphasise sharp differences. I had never felt more foreign, or more conscious of my outsider status. These feelings helped to create a bond with my research participants who were also newcomers—despite our differences in legal status, national origin, and race, we became informants for one another, and together tried to make sense of a different environment, and new ways of being.

I provide this information to briefly situate myself in relation to this work. The dissertation is not about what it means ‘to be Irish,’ or my experiences as a ‘diasporic returnee.’ Instead, it is about the participatory production of documentary stories—created by migrants about Ireland—and the expressive and political challenges of literally and figuratively ‘visualising voice.’ The dissertation reveals the productive audio-visual labour of a shared anthropological practice. This practice, the completed artefacts—field notes, participant scripts, images, and documentary shorts—and the ethnographic relationships developed
between and among researcher, participants, commissioning bodies and nongovernmental organisations reveal complex tensions in, and possibilities for, co-creative documentary storytelling. Issues of veracity and evidence, power and agency, authorship and ownership, and the politics of listening and being heard, are at the heart of the labour. The finished stories are not Tourist Board stories; they do not romanticise Ireland. They do not present Ireland as an immigrant-friendly exception to the immigrant-hostile rule. If I am to be honest, I must recognize that I had hoped to encounter these exceptional stories, but mostly, I did not. I did, however, find emotional complexity, trauma, longing to belong and resistance to belonging, acts of citizenship in circumstances of living without legal documentation, life-affirming nostalgia,² and the desires to be seen, heard, and recognised.

Background and Overview

Figure 1. The recruitment flyer created for Refugee Information Service and Integrating Ireland. The image on the left depicts workshop participants editing their scripts; the centre image depicts one participant sharing a visual sequence with the MRCI community worker and myself; the image on the right depicts Aodán O’Coileáin, the editor at FOMACS who assisted us in post-production.

In June 2007, the Forum on Migration and Communications (FOMACS)—a Dublin-based college media centre—commissioned me to design, develop, direct, and teach two digital storytelling workshops with their nongovernmental partner organisations as fieldwork for my doctoral research. Three nongovernmental organisations—the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI), Refugee Information Service (RIS), and Integrating Ireland—expressed interest in the digital storytelling research, and agreed to collaborate.

Doctoral fieldwork occurred from July 2007 to April 2010, with follow-up interviews and screenings between 2011 and 2012. Fieldwork involved collaboration with fourteen research participants, three nongovernmental organisations, the Dublin Institute of
Technology (DIT), and the development of two longitudinal digital storytelling workshops. Research outputs include two series of broadcast-quality digital stories: *Undocumented in Ireland: Our Stories* and *Living in Direct Provision: 9 Stories*, over two hundred images, a research website, journal articles (Alexandra 2008; Alexandra forthcoming; Grossman & O’Brien 2011), conference papers, invited and keynote presentations, and a doctoral thesis.

Seven women and six men from African (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Morocco, Nigeria, Zimbabwe), Asian (Bangladesh), Middle Eastern (Iran, Iraq) and Eastern European (Serbia, Ukraine) nations participated in the research. The methodology combined social documentary and arts practice (photography, creative writing, audio-visual editing) with critical pedagogy. The participatory, or co-creative production of these stories constituted a means of inquiry in and of itself in which research participants learned fundamental elements of media practice, and creatively documented their lives as newcomers to Ireland. By developing a co-creative community of practice, the goals were to provide a platform for dialogue in which migrants would define, analyse, and represent their subjective experiences of migration, and to explore how the visual could serve as a medium of inquiry through practice (MacDougall 2006: 224). The process of digital storytelling invited participants to construct and represent their experiences from their life histories; therefore, the productive labour, the context within which participants constructed their audio-visual narratives, and the ways in which this practice facilitated moments of inquiry is a central focus of the thesis. It constitutes the ways in which co-creative media practice animates a participatory research method.

In the *Undocumented in Ireland: Our Stories* research workshop, active members of the MRCI’s Bridging Visa Campaign self-selected to participate. For the *Living in Direct Provision* workshop, collaborating NGOs selected research participants through an application
process. Integrating Ireland and Refugee Information Service (RIS) received over thirty applications for ten places in the seminar (figure 1). Community workers who facilitated the outreach selected participants based on their established criteria: 1) an equal number of women and men, and 2) regional representation from asylum centres throughout the country.

Between the two series of workshops, one lawyer, several entrepreneurs, and people with backgrounds and expertise in communications, law, journalism, retail, business, community storytelling, engineering, and photography participated. Participant ages ranged between twenty-eight and sixty. All but three participants were parents, and two participants had grandchildren. Regarding language, the native languages of participants included Ibibio, Igbo, Yoruba, French, English, Serbian, Farsi, Liberian Kreyol, Arabic, Ukrainian, and Bengali.\(^3\) In terms of oral storytelling, two participants—Abazu and Rebecca—identified as community storytellers and volunteered at different storytelling events throughout Ireland. In relation to visual storytelling, all but two participants—Adrian and Mona—had no prior experience in photography, documentary practice, or audio-visual storytelling. At the time of the research, participants had been living in Ireland for between two and eight years.

**On writing and the audio-visual**

As writers, we articulate thoughts and experiences, but as photographers and filmmakers we articulate images of looking and being. What is thought is only implied, unless it is appended in writing or speech. Some would say that images, then, are not

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\(^3\) I encouraged participants to write their scripts and record their audio narratives in the language of their choice, and hoped to hear the linguistic diversity of the group represented in their audio-visual docs. Lyubov recorded her story in her second language, Russian. Lyubov had written her script in her native Ukrainian, but a community interpreter argued that Lyubov ‘should’ instead tell her story in Russian because ‘more people would hear it.’ My sense was that Lyubov wrote her story for her mother and children, and thus Ukrainian seemed congruent with her audience, but the interpreter’s argument convinced Lyubov and in the end, she speaks in Russian. Another participant, Farrokh, included a moment of Farsi in his English script. Because participants were primarily speaking to an Irish audience the majority of practitioners chose to narrate their stories in English.
in any sense knowledge. They simply make knowledge possible, as data from observations. But in another sense they are what we know, or have known, prior to any comparison, judgement or explanation. There is a perceptual as well as a conceptual kind of knowledge. This knowledge has no propositional status (of generality, of explanation) except that proposition of its own existence. It remains to a large extent inert, untapped. Only in the will to declare it do we detect the stirrings of thought (MacDougall 2006: 5).

David MacDougall’s reflection on how thoughts and experiences are articulated differently through writing, photography, and film is helpful for considering the challenges of writing about ‘images of looking and being,’ and more specifically, the difficulties in developing dialogue between the process and artefacts created through practice-based research, and in this case, a PhD dissertation. This challenge is mirrored in the digital storytelling process itself. Research participants explored perceptual and conceptual knowledge of their surroundings through photography, script writing, and audio-visual editing; they tapped into this knowledge as they developed dialogue between narrative storytelling and the more opaque and ambiguous worlds of their images and audio-visual compositions. Throughout the thesis, to demonstrate the unfolding of this process, I focus on interactions of inquiry, dialogue, and creative documentation in relation to the production of participants’ scripts, photographs and audio-visual stories.

The writing styles of anthropologists Ruth Behar (1996, 2009), Angela Garcia (2010), Renato Rosaldo (1993) and Paul Stoller (1997; 2007; 2009) have inspired my approach to writing ethnography. In particular, Angela Garcia’s award-winning ethnography about the geography of addiction in New Mexico’s Española Valley shaped the way I conceptualised writing about research with ‘vulnerable subjects.’ Garcia explains that because her book is ‘concerned with the possibility of caring for one another in the context of extreme difficulty and vulnerability’ (2010: 34-35), representing the work in written form necessitated more than simply changing names, but rather, finding a way to ‘write with care.’ For Garcia,
writing with care translates into foregrounding the people who have shared their lives, and presenting ‘conversations, encounters, recollections and incidents—between them, between us…(that)…capture the humanity, vulnerability and hopefulness of lives I came to care about’ (2010: 35). She puts these interactional moments to analytic work. Garcia explains,

In putting these moments and feelings to analytic work, I have tried to be reserved in my use of theory as such. I believe that ethnography can be constitutive of theory and knowledge production (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009). I have also been reserved because so much theory forecloses the possibility of letting things be vulnerable and uncertain—states of being that I want to engage and evoke. This cautiousness, again, stems from my concern about “fixing” identities to a specific state, especially since so many of the subjects herein describe their on-going struggles with feeling or being perceived as always already caught within them. The challenge, then, is to evoke this sense of being fixed without permanently locking the subjects into such a state (2010: 34-35).

Similarly, the women and men represented here were/are living in conditions of extreme difficulty and vulnerability, and these circumstances raised questions about how to evoke the challenges of living as ‘asylum seekers,’ ‘refugees,’ and ‘undocumented workers’ without ‘fixing identities’ and locking people into limited and limiting labels. Participants themselves considered these questions as they collectively discussed and individually considered what to reveal, and what to conceal regarding diverse aspects of their life stories and everyday experiences. Their collectively crafted images and narrative scripts provided opportunities to consciously consider, and at times resist, the fixing of identity. How to present this creative labour—the context from which the audio-visual stories emerged—became an on-going question while writing the thesis. Following Garcia’s lead, the people who participated in this project are foregrounded, and I aim to put our interactional moments across the workshop site to analytic work. These conversations evoke the complexities and possibilities that underlie the co-creative documentary practice we developed together. Conversations are reconstructed from detailed ethnographic notes, and interviews are transcribed from audio
recordings. Of equal importance are the results of the creative labour that facilitated and grounded our interactions—participants’ images, scripts, and finished documentary essays. Therefore, at the end of each chapter, I invite the reader to listen and view the audio-visual documentary essays discussed in the chapter.

**Images in the thesis**

Regarding the juxtaposition of images and writing within the thesis, photographs from the research are employed as a visual route into the text (Banks 2007: 17). Additionally, images are employed as a poetic means to layer the discussion and develop nuance and force (Behar 2009; Bourgois & Schonberg 2009; O’Grady & Pyke 1997; Rankine 2014) regarding the ways in which research participants developed an auto-ethnographic practice as participant observers of their lives (Gubrium & Turner 2010). This result emerged due to the research design adaptations made to digital storytelling discussed in Chapter 1. In this design, greater emphasis was placed on the role of the visual. Instead of understanding images as tools for eliciting information, or data and evidence of ‘what really happened,’ images were conceptualised as meditational (Edwards & Hart 2004) and ‘useful objects’ (Brushwood Rose 2009) that facilitate inquiry (MacDougall 2006: 224) and allow for analytical and poetic engagements with experience (Edwards 1997). By observing how participants audio-visually represented, and made meaning of their experiences, the research explores how the visual served as a medium for inquiry for research participants. Photographs in the thesis are accompanied by the text one hears when watching practitioners’ documentary essays on screen. In this way, the use of images in the text mirrors the use of stills in moving sequences—the audio-visual editing process of animating photographs on the movie timeline to create the digital story.
Defining the practice and the artefact

Throughout the thesis, ‘digital storytelling’ refers to the participatory creation of self-authored, first person, audio-visual accounts of lived experiences. The two co-creative documentary series developed in the research, *Living in Direct Provision: 9 Stories* and *Undocumented in Ireland: Our Stories* formed the first digital storytelling participatory media and research project in Ireland. Given the significant research adaptations to digital storytelling discussed in Chapter 1, the question of how to theoretically and conceptually situate the practice, and the resulting artefact became salient. These questions impact the language utilised throughout the thesis: I alternately refer to the artefacts created by research participants as ‘documentary essays,’ ‘audio-visual stories,’ ‘multimedia narratives,’ ‘digital stories,’ and ‘auto-ethnographic compositions.’ Regarding method, the boundaries are equally blurred. The digital stories developed in this project were created by the research participant/author/director, and co-produced, over a sustained period of time, within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1999). This distinction provided a platform for developing an observably participatory practice of knowledge production that I connect to critical pedagogy in Chapter 2, and discuss throughout the thesis. Given the research method adaptations, and the ways in which research participants acted as directors and ethnographers–writing, making images, and critically documenting their actuality over a sustained period of time–I propose that ‘co-creative documentary practice’ most adequately defines the work at hand. In the following section I walk the reader through this proposal.

On the one hand, the term ‘digital storytelling’ is ambiguous. It is employed to refer to diverse articulations of ‘vernacular creativity with digital technologies’ (Burgess 2007), often published on-line with various degrees of interactivity. In this broad definition, a Twitter or Facebook post, a fan-created mash-up on YouTube, or an interactive game site
are all considered forms of ‘digital storytelling.’ At the same time, the growing number of audio podcasts and on-line sources for multimedia content are forms of ‘digital storytelling.’ Meanwhile, business and media professionals increasingly use the term ‘digital storytelling’ to refer to their work using new technologies in promotional videos and advertising. On the other hand, the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) has developed and maintained a specific definition and practice for the term ‘digital storytelling’ as a participatory media genre for community reflection, representation and action.

In 1994, the CDS began working in the medium of short, multimedia tales they named ‘digital stories.’ Joe Lambert, founding director of the CDS, locates digital storytelling within a continuum of bardic storytelling, popular theatre and community-based arts (Lambert 2002). The digital storytelling workshop is popularly presented as a democratising practice in which ‘everyone has a story to tell,’ and every day voices are valued (Lambert 2002; Burgess 2006). In this work, the storyteller is conceptualised as someone who has the authority to speak from her experiences, the agency to potentially transform her relationship to story, and the power to potentially affect change through story. Amy Hill, director of the CDS’ international storytelling initiative Silence Speaks, reflects on the transformative representational possibilities of the workshop as follows, ‘the workshop experience allowed (the storyteller) for the first time to have complete control over the telling of a story that related to a situation over which he had no control. So it was a way of reclaiming… experience that allows you autonomy and agency in how you portray it back to the rest of the world’ (Lambert 2002: 153). Based in Berkeley, California, the CDS has assisted in the completion of tens of thousands of digital stories, and trained people across a broad spectrum of community, educational, business, social service and health care organisations to access cultural capital and tell multimedia stories. The organisation has collaborated with
hundreds of organisations internationally (primarily in North America, Europe and Australasia), and popularised a ‘Story Circle,’ and ‘7 Steps Approach’ in which ‘every day people’ learn to create short (2-5 minutes in duration), self-narrated multimedia stories (Lambert 2013). The ‘standard’ CDS digital storytelling workshop model occurs over a pressurised, 1–3 day period in which workshop participants learn ‘the seven steps’ to storytelling and basic tools for audio-visual editing, share a story during a ‘story circle’ and produce that story using readily-available media editing platforms. The workshop concludes with an internal screening of the completed digital stories, and participants go home with their media assets and a copy of their story ready to upload on the media platform of their choice. In Europe, perhaps the most well known project that built from the CDS model is the BBC programme, ‘Capture Wales’–the first broadcast television platform for digital storytelling. Daniel Meadows, Creative Director for the programme, which ran from 2001-2006, describes digital stories as ‘elegant and economic multimedia sonnets from the people,’ and digital storytelling as ‘an engaging, rich, short media form, which can be mastered by people of differing abilities and from all walks of life (Meadows & Kidd 2009: 91).

In his discussion of documentary filmmaking, Bill Nichols acknowledges the difficulty of defining terminology. He writes, ‘Definitions of documentary are always playing catch-up, trying to adapt to changes in what counts as a documentary and why’ (2010: 15). Nevertheless, Nichols outlines a series of ‘common-sense assumptions that define documentary’ (2010: 7-14), and synthesizes these defining concepts as follows:

1) ‘Documentaries are about reality; they’re about something that actually happened. Documentary films speak about actual situations or events, and honour known facts; they do not introduce new, unverifiable ones. They speak directly about the historical world rather than allegorically’ (2010: 7).
2). ‘Documentaries are about real people who do not play or perform roles’ (2010: 8).

3). ‘Documentaries tell stories about what happens in the real world. To the extent a documentary tells a story, the story is a plausible representation of what happened, rather than an imaginative interpretation of what might have happened’ (2010: 10-11).

Discussion of digital storytelling initiatives is absent from Nichol’s analysis, but let’s consider the similarities and differences between these general documentary definitions, and the stories created by research participants/directors. Their audio-visual stories are based on reality; real people in the real world authored and created these documentary essays. However, due to the circumstances of research participants, not all details in the stories are necessarily verifiable. And many of the stories introduce aspects of living in the asylum system, or the experiences of living without legal documentation that might not be considered ‘known facts’ among general audiences. Some of the stories counter, and ‘speak back’ to popularly held assumptions about asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. Furthermore, one research participant who was particularly concerned about maintaining her anonymity to offset any possibility of being fixed with the label of ‘asylum seeker,’ chose to create an allegorical, ‘Every Asylum Seeker’ story based on her own lived experiences, as well as those of other African women living in the direct provision asylum system (Aduro Life, Rebecca, 2009). Nevertheless, the stories created by research participants addressed similar themes when compared to research carried out through more standard sociological studies.

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4 This section on documentary is by no means exhaustive; rather, I take the work of one eminent scholar of documentary film studies and use it to explore how ‘digital storytelling’ can be considered a member of the genre. For discussion about the historic work of documentary practice, primarily in the United States, and focused on photography and writing, see Coles, 1997. For documentary in relation to photography see also Ewald, 2006 and the Center for Documentary Studies and Duke University, http://documentarystudies.duke.edu/projects/past-projects/literacy-through-photography, accessed September 15, 2014. On the politics and art of the ‘migrant image’ see MacDonald, 2013.
based on interviews with undocumented migrants, and asylum seekers living in the direct provision system in Ireland (Breen 2008; Irish Refugee Council 2001; FLAC 2003, 2009; Loyal 2011). Verifiability in a legal or journalistic sense cannot be one of the foundational principals to this approach, but there is an understanding that authors are not purposefully misleading the audience. In this way, digital storytelling most closely resembles the first person narrative, documentary essay. One primary difference between documentary filmmaking and digital storytelling pertains to the role of the author/director. Although documentary filmmaking requires intense participation and observation, the subjects of the film are not usually the authors/directors. Rather, the director maintains final authorship. There are directors who co-author stories in community contexts, and develop ways to share decision-making regarding content production, editing and screening, but they are the exception.

Over the 66-year lifespan of ethnographic film, anthropologists as filmmakers (and vice versa) have experimented and adapted the form in response to technological advancements, shifting contexts, and changing theoretical impulses (MacDougall 1978). Questions and contentions regarding what constitutes an ethnographic film, and what purpose these cultural artefacts serve, have remained constant. In regards to ethnographic film, two primary methodological tendencies can be identified in contrast to the Center for Digital Storytelling model. First, the filmed subject and the filmmaker are not usually one and the same. Second, editing is not usually based on a scripted story written and produced by the filmed subject or film protagonist. Nevertheless, digital storytelling can be situated

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5 An important exception is autobiographical documentaries, a popular genre within documentary practice.

6 In Recording Memories from Political Violence: A Film-maker's Journey, Cahal McLaughlin discusses issues of authorship and collaboration on diverse film productions, in particular the South African production, We Never Give Up, which was developed in collaboration with Khulumani Western Cape (2010).
alongside feminist and auto-ethnographic forms of filmmaking (Gubrium 2009a; Hill 2010). Of particular interest here are those forms of media engagement that seek to communicate ‘indigenous perspectives,’ which might illuminate more formally derived knowledge…films (that give) access to the interior world of people who had previously been shown only as objects of research’ (MacDougall 1978: 417). This is precisely the point of digital storytelling as a form of inquiry—to facilitate a learning environment in which research participants co-create objects of research—the audio-visual artefact. Because the finished artefact is constructed primarily with photographs and other still images, in my view the digital story is most closely associated with the minor filmmaking genre of ‘photofilm.’ Arnd Schneider describes photofilm as, ‘a somewhat arcane visual practice at the crossroads between film and photography, and which reveals shared principles of, and roots in, animation’ (2014: 27).

According to Schneider, filmmakers who have developed photofilms include Sergei Eisenstein (Strike, 1925), Dziga Vertov (Man with a Movie Camera, 1928/29), John Dos Passos (USA Trilogy, 1938), Alain Resnais (Van Gogh, 1948; Guernica 1950), and more recently, Chris Marker (La Jetée, 1962), Mau & Fichte (Der Fischmarkt und die Fische, 1968) and Dick Blau (A Polish Easter in Chicago, 2011). I would add to this list the work of Pedro Meyer (Fotografía para Recordar, 1991).

These noteworthy examples provide a rich background for considering the ways in which photography can be animated in relation to sound and spoken narrative as a means toward the development of evocative, experimental storytelling. Of particular interest to this project is Schneider’s argument that the genre of photofilm ‘does not create or pretend the illusion of movement, but incites temporal and mental movement of the viewer. Because of their consecutive lining up of still image, photofilms, even when they narrate through image

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order and voice, always question (and push up against) the illusionary time-creating character of mainstream narrative film’ (2014: 29).

Co-creative documentary: Toward a shared anthropology

Media scholars studying digital storytelling initiatives in diverse community contexts in Australia (Spurgeon et al. 2009) propose the term ‘co-creative media’ as a concept more precise than ‘digital storytelling’ to describe ‘the ways in which participatory media are facilitated by people and organisations, not just technology’ (2009: 275). The authors write that the concept of co-creative media ‘seeks to remind us that participatory new media culture is socially produced, and to acknowledge the difficulties that can be associated with achieving participatory culture’ (2009: 275). This reminder emphasizes both the democratizing, participatory ideal of digital storytelling as well as the ethical, political and aesthetic challenges of such endeavors. In effect, institutions, grant money, community organizations, workshop facilitators and participants all serve to advance (and restrict) what stories can, and cannot be told, who is heard, and to what end.

Given these inherent constraints, the research is interested in the ways in which the objects were consciously constructed within a community of practice, and how this position forwards an idealistic, but in no way naïve concept of ‘shared anthropology.’ The notion of ‘shared anthropology’ can be traced to the film practice and theory of French ethnographer and storyteller, Jean Rouch (Stoller 1992; Feld 2003; Pink 2011). According to Paul Stoller (1992), Rouch did not conceptualise the act of audio-visual recording as a means of collecting data and capturing reality, but as an “arena” of inquiry and ‘a path to existential discovery’ (Stoller, personal communication, 19 December 2014). Stoller writes, ‘the camera does not capture reality; it creates reality—or cine-reality—a set of images that evokes ideas and stimulates dialogue between observer, observed, and viewer (Stoller 1992: 193). In a 1990
interview, Lucien Castaing Taylor asked Rouch how he situated himself in relation to the anthropological academy. Rouch responded, ‘I contest anthropology in my emphasis on the need to share, to produce in a medium that allows dialogue and dissent across societal lines’ (Feld 2003: 137). Rouch traces his interest in participatory ethnographic filmmaking to two of his most important influences—the Irish-American filmmaker Robert Flaherty, and the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov. Rouch writes that while Flaherty employed the empirical technique of ‘allowing’ his protagonists to participate in the film and view the finished outcome, Vertov developed a discipline of filmic truth, or ‘kinopravda’ by throwing himself into the action and participating in life through the camera (Feld 2003: 98). This use of film in a ‘participatory’ manner facilitated what Rouch called ‘ethno-dialogue.’ Rouch considered ethno-dialogue to be ‘one of the most interesting angles in the current progress of ethnography. Knowledge is no longer a stolen secret, devoured in the Western temples of knowledge; it is the result of an endless quest where ethnographers and those whom they study meet on a path that some of us now call ‘shared anthropology’ (Feld 2003: 101). Through the development of a shared anthropology in this study, the lines between ‘the ethnographer,’ and ‘those whom they study’ shifted. Participants authored their documentary essays by directing their inquiry inward to consider the context, and developing their practice as multi-media ethnographers. The image and script production and audio-visual editing facilitated inter-personal inquiry and dialogue, and provided the medium facilitating a shared anthropology, and more precisely, a co-creative documentary practice through photofilm.

The previous section briefly contextualised digital storytelling and the concept of co-creative documentary in relation to ethnographic film, photofilm and documentary practice. The following section introduces two inter-related concepts—‘community of practice’ and ‘political listening’—that provide theoretical anchors and methodological points of entry for
the research. The final section of the chapter traces the epistemological and methodological foundations and longings of the research.

**Community of practice**

Based on their observations of working environments, professional and craft organisations, and apprenticeship relationships of learning, anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger developed their ‘community of practice’ (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1999) theory. A community of practice develops over time and through endeavours of collective learning and teaching. Longitudinal digital storytelling workshops can be understood as communities of practice in which participants engage with the elements of audio-visual storytelling and begin to learn a series of skills pertaining to first-person essay filmmaking. Audio-visual storytelling takes time and skill. Everyone might well have many stories to tell, but not everyone has the patience, determination and opportunity to develop their craft. During the workshop with members of the MRCI’s Bridging Visa Campaign, some scholars expressed scepticism about whether or not research participants would complete the project. One prominent migration scholar opined that migrant workers were ‘too tired,’ and ‘too busy’ to think or care about audio-visual storytelling, or creative expression. The assumption was that participants would have ‘more important’ things to do, and think about. Due to a combination of factors, including the centrality of belonging to a community of practice, the opposite was true. The urgency of a story, and the intimacy and support developed among a community of practice buoyed participants who were indeed tired and busy, but also desired to think critically about audio-visual storytelling, creative expression, and the symbolic and material power of their stories. Throughout the thesis, I present different moments that represent a community of practitioners in action–moments when research participants critically question and support each other’s ideas, and mentor and learn from one another.
**Political listening**

The distinct dialogical moments among a community of practice within and across the workshop site are analysed as encounters of ‘political listening’ (Bickford 1996) that potentially restrict, limit, and facilitate ‘voice.’ In each chapter these encounters raise questions in relation to the limits, controls, and possibilities of co-creative documentary practice with, for, and about ‘migrant voices.’ The analytical focus on the role of listening aims to develop a more robust and less simplistic understanding of ‘voice’ within the context of storytelling. Furthermore, because digital storytelling research was funded through a college media centre and unfolded in collaboration with diverse advocacy organisations, the centrality of listening needed to be considered in all aspects of the storytelling process—from pre-production to production to distribution. Finally, through my diverse responsibilities as researcher, project director, educator, editor, and co-director of participants’ audio-visual compositions, a critical understanding of ‘voice’ and the role of listening emerged organically. As educator, editor, and co-director, my positionality was ‘on the side’ of the author/protagonist/research participant—following the lead of participants’ experiences and knowledge, and mentoring their creative labour as they developed their narratives into audio-visual stories. Within my role as researcher, I was required to develop ‘distance,’ to speak and write ‘critically’ about the context, and the process. These diverse positions necessitated an on-going attention to the role of listening as a productive site for reflection.

**Storytelling and hauntings**

John Berger writes that storytelling serves to accompany and ‘comfort’ the storyteller (1997: ii). This research project is situated within the possibility that the participatory and creative

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8 Digital storytelling is increasingly employed within therapeutic contexts in the fields of health care, and human and civil rights. See for example Patient Voices, [http://www.patientvoices.org.uk](http://www.patientvoices.org.uk), accessed December
process of documenting lived experiences through audio-visual means—producing media within a community of practice—might not only accompany and comfort the storyteller, but also provide her/him with inroads to inquiry. This act of inquiry is particularly meaningful during times when certain stories are silenced, or cannot be told.

As researchers and practitioners, what is our responsibility to the storyteller? As Paul Stoller (1997) might ask, how are we implicated? In what ways can storytelling disrupt the tendency toward what Benjamin (1968) considered to be the information of the generalizable? These big questions continue to be important for the fields of anthropology, migration, media and globalization studies. By considering them, we implicate the epistemological framework, the pedagogy, and the methods we employ in researching with our protagonists. If our scholarship is to work from the lived experiences of participants themselves, these framing questions provide a directional pathway. They answer back to the call for research that resists the categorization and organizing principles of nation-states that are more concerned with capital accumulation than the human rights of migrants (Loyal, S. & K. Allen 2006: 216). The questions point to the need for narrative practices that reveal complex meanings, practices in which people not only tell, but also more fundamentally, explore, critically consider, and co-create their experiences into story.

In his 1936 essay *The Storyteller: Observations on the works of Nikolai Leskov*, Walter Benjamin explores the incommunicability of experience post WWI, and expresses longing

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15th, 2014; Silence Speaks—a human rights project for survivors of gender violence, [http://silencespeaks.org](http://silencespeaks.org), accessed December 15th, 2014; and Silver Stories, [http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/silver-stories](http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/silver-stories), accessed December 15th, 2014. This research project was not expressly therapeutic in its conception. Nevertheless, during informal interviews participants spoke to an emotional benefit of having participated in the process of creating a story.
for what he understands as the decline of the art of storytelling in the face of an increasingly mechanized and information-based society. Benjamin writes,

Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it...The most extraordinary things, marvellous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks (1968: 89).

Benjamin’s passage speaks to the epistemological and methodological desires of the research, which inform the development of a participatory inquiry practice built from a critical engagement with experience to produce evocative stories that value the storyteller, as well as the listener. To Benjamin’s mind, the collective act of storytelling must be unsentimental, and the story itself useful. Benjamin likens the labour of the storyteller to that of the craftsman—a storyteller shapes ‘the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way’ (Benjamin 1968: 108). The ‘gift’ of the storyteller is the ability to relate life in such a manner as to invite the listener to find her place within the story, and to continue it. The story is imprinted first with the experiences of the storyteller, and then, those of the listener as she in turn, re-tells it. These ideas provide touchstones for the ways in which participants and I approached the storytelling in this research. Stories would be ‘useful’ for the storyteller, and possibly, the listener. Participants would shape the raw material of experience through their own unique perspectives. Through editing, the author would invite the listener to experience a story, many times with the hope that stories would be publicly screened and considered.

As I discuss in detail in chapters one and two, this approach responded to the circumstances of research participants themselves. It also drew from my expertise as a
human rights activist, interpreter, and educator.\(^9\) During those years (1987-1998), I observed the ways in which stories were ‘shot through with explanation’–the ways stories were taken, subtracted, translated and defined–and found myself questioning how intricate, lived experiences were simplified and utilised. Although never explicitly discussed, it appeared that this reductive approach was considered necessary in order to shape public opinion, create debate, and change policy. After all, we aimed to frame the conversation; we needed to develop talking points; memorize sound bites; define the key moment; tell the viewer/listener/voter/citizen what to think/feel/say, or do. At best, and at times, this strategic act of defining meaning delivered significant outcomes and accomplishments. However, where did the sharpening toward information leave the act of storytelling, the process of making meaning, and the storyteller herself? During my fieldwork in Ireland these questions materialised again at the centre of two primary concerns that are discussed throughout the thesis–the politics of listening in the articulation, visualisation and reception of voice, and the ethics of audio-visual storytelling. To consider these inter-connected areas of inquiry, I would like to go back for a moment in time and place, and consider the process of crafting and making objects–in this case narratives and photographs in relation to my own experience as an internationalist in El Salvador.

**The photograph not taken**

Susan Sontag writes, ‘Narratives can make us understand, photographs do something else: they haunt us’ (2003: 89). This story begins with such a haunting; a photograph present in its absence; a photograph not taken; an image turned poem. The poem, *I Am Telling You Now*,

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\(^9\) From 1989 to 1998 I worked in El Salvador coordinating solidarity delegations, interpreting human rights testimonies, and researching the whereabouts of children who were forcibly disappeared during the war (1980-1992) as an investigator with the Association in Search of Disappeared Children (*Asociación Pro Búsqueda*).
details the result of a paramilitary assassination in El Salvador toward the end of the war. Documenting this assassination through poetry granted an opportunity to engage with a traumatic experience on my own terms. As I will discuss, the process of crafting the poem provided an act of recognition, and a strategy to re/present violence in a way that, as John Berger (1984) suggests, ‘shelters the experience’ of the storyteller. Berger writes,

Poems, regardless of any outcome, cross the battlefields, tending the wounded, listening to the wild monologues of the triumphant or the fearful. They bring a kind of peace. Not by anaesthesia or easy reassurance, but by recognition and the promise that what has been experienced cannot disappear as if it had never been. Yet the promise is not of a monument. (Who, still on a battlefield, wants monuments?) The promise is that language has acknowledged; has given shelter to the experience, which demanded, which cried out (Berger 1984: 21).

As I hope to reveal, the process of crafting the poem, and the artefact itself, provided a means of critical engagement that testimony telling alone could not. In this way, the creative mediational practice of writing the poem has epistemologically and methodologically informed my research with asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants in Ireland. I turn now to the poem.
I am Telling You Now

Walking in Sycamore Canyon,
hundreds of miles and years gone,

I find his image
here—beaten from the stem, thrown down
in monsoon wind,

ccaught in the knuckles of the cottonwood.
The message they left.

I remember the color—
circles like paint drops, and not. A young woman
sobbing inside a young man’s arms.

Cabinets torn from the shoulders of the room.
Typewriters dragged to the floor.

A single phone jack pulled from its socket.
Military boot prints.
That color in circles—like paint drops, and not.

Someone, maybe it is the young woman,
tells me, Take a photo.

Captured in the final station of the cross,
a man in his mid-fifties
tied to a pillar for everyone to see.

His collapsed head twisting from his neck slashed open,
his tough feet exposed, his hands bulbous and empty,
his polyester pants too large for his thin body.

My eyes
rush across him. Night watchman.
Who belonged to him?

His body
as they destroyed it. The photograph
I did not take.
Context and questions: The space between witnessing, telling, and being heard

I had arrived in San Salvador on a morning flight from Los Angeles, and gone directly to the labour union office. During the war, popular movement and human rights organisations set up office in residential neighbourhoods as a way of attempting to protect their work from attack, and their members from forced disappearance, or assassination. We sat in what would have been the garage of a medium-sized home, catching up over coffee and cigarettes, when Vicente called me to the phone.

‘Te llama el CCM’

The government presumably tapped telephone lines so people kept conversations short. No discussion of names, dates, or times. I received a brief request: please come at once.

‘Inmediatamente.’

‘Lo más pronto posible.’

‘Ahora mismo.’

I no longer remember the exact words spoken, but I hailed a cab. This was my fourth visit to El Salvador; I had learned to take precautions, and assess urgency based on little verbal communication. We were not to memorize street addresses, nor to exit the bus at a final destination. Instead, we were to navigate the city by landmarks, and choose stops at frequently travelled destinations and carefully walk the difference. I took cabs only in

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10 “The CCM is calling.” The CCM, or Marginal Communities Council, was a grassroots organization representing urban slum dwellers. These communities were largely comprised of internally displaced individuals and families escaping ‘scorched earth’ policies of the Salvadoran military forces and poverty in the rural regions of the country. The CCM organized community members around needs for housing, land, healthcare, job training, and literacy. They trained and promoted ‘educadores populares,’ or community educators, who practiced critical pedagogy in their neighborhoods around community members’ most pressing concerns. Many of their activists were youth who organized against the military’s forced recruitment policy, which disproportionately impacted the poor. The CCM also organized land occupations as a means to pressure the government into addressing the urgency of internal refugee displacement.
extraordinary circumstances. Given the high level of militarisation and increased violence during this period, differentiating ‘extraordinary’ from ‘ordinary’ proved difficult.

That day, I told the driver to take me to a popular restaurant, a Pollo Campero near the maternity hospital. While in the cab I worried over the upcoming solidarity delegation I was coordinating, and the logistics of collaborating with diverse groups including the Marginal Communities Council (CCM)—an urban grassroots organisation that had come under government attack.

Upon arrival at the CCM, the first person I saw was a friend. We greeted with a hug, but we did not speak. He was comforting a young woman just inside the office entryway. She was crying. Walking toward the central, internal patio I immediately saw why I had been asked to come. But, I was not an international photojournalist. Nor was I one of the Salvadoran human rights workers who acted as forensic photographers and routinely documented the tortured bodies of the people killed during the war. I was a young woman called to take a photograph, and I did not, could not, or would not collect the visual evidence. On the evening of witnessing the crime, I wrote about what I had seen. Ironically, the first kernel of writing resembled a snapshot:

*Captured in the final station of the cross, a man in his mid-fifties,*

*Tied to a pillar for everyone to see. His collapsed head twisting from his neck slashed open.*

*His tough feet exposed. His hands bulbous and empty.*

*His polyester pants too large for his thin body.*

*My eyes*

*Rush across him. This man*

*The night watchman, father and husband.*

In her discussion of the ethical challenges and responsibilities of visual representation, documentary photographer Donna DeCesare states:
My work on the gang situation in Guatemala often took me to the morgue. The forensic examiners told me that I could photograph this young man’s bullet-ridden body and face. If I were a forensic photographer such grisly details of wounds might serve an evidentiary purpose. I thought about his mother, and how she would feel if she confronted such an image in the newspaper, and looked for a different perspective (http://www.donnadecesare.com/portfolio/witnessing-picturing-violence/).

Documenting the assassination of Martín Ayala through poetry provided an unconscious strategy for finding a ‘different perspective.’ There was also something more urgent at stake, which I did not identify until years later while reading Regarding the Pain of Others. Susan Sontag wrote, ‘To display the dead, after all, is what the enemy does’ (Sontag 2003: 64). This one sentence spoke to my visceral inability, or refusal, to photograph. To photograph Martin Ayala Ramírez’s destroyed body—the message they left displayed for everyone to see—felt a complicit act. I would speak to the murder, but not through photography. In that moment, to not photograph the message they left felt a compassionate recognition of Martin Ayala’s human dignity. To display the dead, after all, is what the enemy does. Perhaps it was also an act of self-compassion when faced with the terror of his murder. I cannot know; what I do remember is a physical inability to photograph his slain body.

Media acutely objectified El Salvador–both the country and the people–during the war. Journalists and photographers seemed perpetually to be coming and going, taking their images and stories with them. The military routinely photographed activists and people they deemed suspicious. During popular movement demonstrations, when helicopters and small aircraft flew low overhead, not only could one observe the mounted machine guns, but also, video cameras. National human rights organisations and internationalists increasingly carried stills cameras and video camcorders, but they were not the commonplace items they are today. At that point in time members of the popular movement most often viewed cameras with suspicion–more as weapons of surveillance and control to be used against them than as
advocacy tools to protect human rights and document violations. The government utilised national media outlets to publish photographs (figure 2) that publicly defamed members of community organisations. For example, one such media campaign published photographs of women and men in the local newspaper accompanied with short descriptions of their alleged ‘terrorist activities,’ and a standard caption that read: ‘She (or he) is a Terrorist.’

*Figure 2. Newspaper clipping from the Salvadoran newspaper, Diario Latino, circa 1989, reads:*

'She is a terrorist. Legal Name: Maria Trinidad Olmedo. Pseudonym: Catalina. Organization: National Resistance FARN.\(^{11}\) Front Group: ADEMUSA\(^{12}\) and CRIPDES.\(^{13}\) Joined in 1983. Responsible for serving as a courier between Guazapa-Suchitoto and San Salvador carrying messages and evacuating the wounded, in coordination with Reyna Isabel de Castro from the Bautista Emmanuelle Church. Her work in ADEMUSA and CRIPDES was making explosives to be used during demonstrations and acts of sabotage. FMLN\(^{14}\) = ADEMUSA. Don’t let them hook you!*

\(^{11}\) **FARN** – *Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional* was one of five political-military organisations comprising the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN).

\(^{12}\) ADEMUSA formed in 1988 as an organization to support women’s educational, and economic development.

\(^{13}\) CRIPDES formed in 1984 to assist internally displaced war refugees suffering human rights violations.

\(^{14}\) The FMLN–Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation–was a coalition of five political-military organisations formed in 1980. With the signing of the UN-brokered Peace Accord in 1992, the FMLN disbanded militarily, and became a political party. In 2004, FMLN candidate and former FMLN commander, Salvador Sanchez Cerén was elected President of El Salvador.
Activities deemed suspicious by the national government included participation in teacher’s unions, social movement organisations, organisations that addressed the educational, housing and health care needs of impoverished, marginal community members, and particularly any organisational efforts that provided assistance to internally displaced war refugees. Salvadoran human rights activists noted that not only did these media campaigns aim to terrorize the population, and justify state violence through a discourse of ‘patriotic’ struggle against domestic ‘terrorists,’ but also doubly served as a macabre, public announcement that the life of the individual appearing in the published photograph was in imminent danger.

Our delegation provided ‘accompaniment’\textsuperscript{15} to members of the Marginal Communities Council (CCM) as they released public statements denouncing the murder and attack on their office, and calling for a criminal investigation. Along with other people from the international solidarity and Salvadoran social movements, we attended the wake of Martín Ayala Ramírez. The crime of his murder was documented and denounced internationally by Amnesty International and other national and international human rights organisations, but to my knowledge those responsible for Mr. Ayala Ramírez’s murder have not been brought to trial. For me, this event came to encapsulate a particular tension between the intended impact, and the actual impacts of ‘bearing witness.’ The physical absence of the photograph I did not take is bound to the indelible presence of the image of

\textsuperscript{15} I first learned about the practice of non-violent ‘accompaniment’ from activists working with Peace Brigades International, a non-violent, human rights peacekeeping organisation that developed Gandhian principles to further their work in areas in conflict and crisis. The premise of accompaniment was that an international, physical presence would deter, or limit, the possibilities of violence against members of society who had come under attack. During ‘solidarity brigades’ organized by the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, this included providing a physical presence at the offices of human rights, labour and grassroots organisations, accompanying movement leaders during meetings and public events, attending demonstrations, funerals and press conferences, and following the lead of Salvadoran experts on the ground regarding their security needs and priorities.
Martín Ayala Ramírez’s murdered body. Today, this absence marks the uncertain territory between witnessing (embodied experience), telling (overcoming disbelief), showing (the evidential), and being heard (recognition and impact).

US solidarity activists adapted the popular movement strategy of *testimonio* developed throughout the Americas in the second half of the twentieth century ‘in which the purpose of bearing witness (and speaking out) is to motivate listeners to participate in the struggles against injustice’ (Behar 1996: 27). As such, I told this story in the context of raising awareness about the human and material cost of US intervention in Central America. In the face of systemic human rights violations that implicated me as a US citizen, providing testimony seemed a responsible action. However, the public telling of the atrocity was divorced from my internal relationship with the story. It did not necessarily provide opportunity for critical reflection. I did not better understand what had happened, or gain resolution. The experience did not become less horrific. In publicly presenting my testimony I never felt consoled by the telling. On the contrary—publicly rendering experiences from this war left me feeling vulnerable, and deeply uncertain about the actual political impact of such *testimonio* telling. The political climate of the Reagan and Bush years in the United States offered limited reception for witness accounts that negatively implicated US foreign policy. My embodied experience of the violence of ‘low-intensity’ intervention in El Salvador contrasted significantly with the popular mythology of the United States as benevolent world peacekeeper. The sting of carrying a story few would critically address, the knowledge that

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certain stories are purposefully denied, the fear that a story would be misrepresented or exoticised—these possibilities detained me. On the other hand, the experience ‘cried out,’ as Berger writes (1984: 21), and demanded a form of expression that could provide both acknowledgement and shelter.

**The ‘useful object’**

I wrote *I Am Telling You Now* slowly, across time and space, with careful attention. The writing process provided a means to externalise, critically engage, and document a terrifying event. The act of crafting an object facilitated a poetic and analytical engagement with lived experience. It not only served to excavate, but also to elucidate absences, tensions, positions and possibilities. It traced a significant absence—a photograph I did not, and perhaps could not, take. Several landscapes shaped the poem. The landscape of political violence and institutional impunity nearing the end of the US-backed Salvadoran war (1980-1992); the emotional landscape of bearing witness; the landscape of militarisation, border crossings and resilience of the Sonoran desert; and the landscape of memory as I recounted the details of that day in 1991 when I was a young internationalist in wartime El Salvador. Analysing my experiences of testimonial telling in contrast to the process of crafting an object—in this case a poem—informed my research with migrants in Ireland. It surfaced a productive apprehension toward testimony, which necessitated a critical gaze toward the im/possibilities of testimony, conscious attention to the storyteller, and purposeful contextualisation of the story. It served as a taproot toward evocative practices that might offer multiple pathways of interpretation, connection and contestation. It inspired an interest in exploring the ways in which poetry, creative writing, photography, and audio-visual editing serve as tools for reflection, dialogue, debate, and even understanding of human experience. Within this context, Walter Benjamin’s assertion that ‘now almost nothing that happens benefits
storytelling; almost everything benefits information’ is particularly evocative toward an engagement with storytelling that conceptualises the act as co-creative, mediational, and situated (Abu-Lughod 2008: 15). In this conceptualisation, storytelling is not only an act, but also a potential site for externalising acts of transformative representation, a counter-position to the limitations of ‘information.’ At the heart of these interests is an attentive vigilance for how stories are told, developed, and received; who is heard and to what end.
Figure 3. Illustrations created by Pierre’s daughter to visually narrate his digital story, An Island Called Ireland. Image taken from the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) media lab where we held our weekly workshops.

Voice and Visibility: Limits and Controls

Malik\(^{18}\) seemed agitated. Approximately six weeks into the workshop he called me to schedule a meeting. He arrived at the college and began by saying he had just spoken with his lawyer. He had wanted to ask her opinion about the digital storytelling research to see whether she thought it okay for him to participate. The lawyer told Malik that any story he might tell would not help his case. She told him to be ‘very careful,’ and to not make a ‘black spot.’ Malik repeated this several times. He then mentioned the Department of Justice, saying:

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\(^{18}\)To protect research participants' identities, pseudonyms are used, and certain town names are changed.
They don’t like it if you tell the truth about your life in the (direct provision) hostel. They will make trouble for you. Myself I keep quiet; I don’t complain (field notes, October 16, 2008).

I asked Malik if he thought his lawyer was a well-informed advocate for his case. He replied that he trusted her opinion. He told me how when he first arrived in Ireland, a pro bono solicitor was assigned to his case. This solicitor concluded that Malik’s case was ‘dead,’ and abruptly told him to stop calling when Malik attempted to follow-up. Malik was determined to consult a different lawyer. He pooled together money from extended family members and found a lawyer who arrived at a different conclusion: Malik’s petition for asylum was ‘very strong.’

Malik looked as though he hadn’t been sleeping well, and his hands shook slightly, but he spoke with determination and clarity. I suggested that if he trusted the solicitor he had now, it seemed best to follow her advice, and not tell a story about any subject connected to his legal petition, or the asylum hostel. Malik reiterated that he did not want to tell a story about the hostel, saying:

There is no time, no date for me to get free, but when I’m free I will be able to do whatever I want. I don’t want to make any mistake. I don’t want a black spot for my case (field notes, October 16, 2008).

Thinking about which story Malik might develop, I asked if he had been taking photographs or writing in his journal. He told me he hadn’t had time outside the workshop to think about possible stories. I reminded him of a workshop session during which the group discussed Mona’s script about the trauma of family separation, and the uncertainty of reunification. Malik had responded to Mona’s script by sharing about his own life. He told Mona what mattered most was that she was alive and her children still had a mother. His mother and father were killed in Iraq. He arrived in Ireland alone, and was placed in a decrepit, rural accommodation centre. Under the weight of his loss, he became depressed. He hated the
food. He didn’t speak English. Somehow, he discovered a survival strategy, which he outlined to the group that day during the workshop—get out of the hostel, spend time in the pub and make friends. He told the group, ‘Dunraine is my town now; I’m in love with Dunraine’ (field notes, September 29, 2008). Based on this workshop interaction, I suggested to Malik that he tell a story about the town he had grown to love, the friends he had made, his advice for asylum seekers, or something entirely different of his choosing. Malik seemed to like these possibilities. He said he ‘loved’ the workshop and wanted very much to continue.

Malik then changed the subject, referring to a conversation during the workshop in which participants had analysed the living conditions in their accommodation centres. In contrast to the popular belief among some Irish people that asylum seekers ‘had it made,’ participants detailed the ways in which the asylum centres, and the services they received there, endangered their physical and mental wellbeing. One participant, Ogo, a father of two girls, had spoken about the stress of raising his children in cramped living quarters where he and his wife had little control over how they could parent. His family of four lived in one room where they ended up spending most of their time. Ogo explained that the shared public spaces were inappropriate for children—there were few activities and games for them, and many strangers who weren’t necessarily good role models. Overall, Ogo assessed the accommodation centre as an unhealthy, unsafe and even dangerous environment for children to play and develop. In terms of nutrition, Ogo spent his allotted weekly allowance on food, explaining that if he didn’t do this, his children would go to school with mouldy fruit and stale bread. He said his family used personal care and cleaning products that Ogo considered hazardous. For example, he maintained that the toothpaste they received had been banned by the European Union. Whether or not this particular assertion was true (and
the majority of participants thought it was), it speaks to the sense of marginalisation, and the absence of safety and wellbeing that Ogo and his family experienced in the ‘accommodation’ centre.

Ogo expressed his concerns to hostel management, and actively organized to improve conditions in the centre. Malik believed this only caused more trouble for Ogo, and confided to me that the hostel manager discriminated against Ogo because of his activism. Malik expressed concern over the differences in treatment the two men received.

She (the hostel manager) likes me, but she doesn’t like Ogo. We are from different countries (Malik from Iraq and Ogo from Nigeria), but now we are the same, and she treats us differently. I don’t like it (field notes, October 16, 2008).

Malik had reason to believe that the hostel manager withheld Ogo’s post as a way of punishing him for speaking out about the living conditions in their accommodation centre.

Malik assessed the observations and claims Ogo had made during workshop, and said:

He’s telling the truth. It’s the truth. I used to complain too, but I learned it doesn’t make a difference. You only make a bad face for yourself. And it doesn’t make a difference. The Department of Justice doesn’t like it (field notes, October 16, 2008).

This conversation, which lasted over two hours, encapsulates the dialogical nature of the research—the ways in which conversations occurred among diverse actors and stakeholders across the workshop site. It also illustrates the vulnerable circumstances that research participants endure while living in direct provision. In and out of the research site, participants discussed and interrogated the asylum system through their creative writing, image making, and audio-visual editing. The conversations facilitated through the inquiry and the artefacts revealed a debilitating lack of autonomy for individuals and families living in conditions of internment; a sense of imprisonment within a system that disregards the

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19 Participants received their train or bus passage in the post at their accommodation centres each week.
safety, well-being and dignity of asylum seekers; concern for how living in direct provision was impacting on the lives of young family members spending significant portions of their childhood and adolescence in state institutions; and a pattern of intimidation against, and fear of, speaking out and organising for change.

The conversation with Malik gave me sleepless nights and anxious thoughts about the ethical implications and responsibilities of the research, and the role of listening: in effect, the politics of listening. What stories would participants choose to tell, and what impact might those stories have? How might the stories affect participants’ living conditions in the asylum centres? Could the repercussions of audio-visually ‘speaking out’ be determined? When considering if, and how to participate in the research project, and if and how to release their final audio-visual compositions for distribution and viewing, participants faced these complex questions.

Finally, the interaction with Malik demarcated a central tension that ran throughout the research—the external controls and restrictions placed upon stories and storytellers; the limits and controls on voice and visibility. These challenges are part and parcel of a complex interface between small-scale participatory research (as a site for inquiry, reflection, and possibility), and larger-scale systems of management and control (the asylum and legal systems, and the expectations and agendas of nongovernmental organisations and funding institutions). From engagement through production to dissemination, the challenges of literally and figuratively visualising voice, and the controls and restrictions limiting voice and visibility became crucial themes. During the production and distribution process, in conversations within and across the workshop site, participants considered the impact of audio-visually ‘speaking out.’ Their stories were subtly and not-so-subtly scrutinized for truthfulness, and questions surfaced about what constituted a ‘migrant’ story, what ‘migrant
voices’ ‘can,’ and ‘cannot,’ ‘should’ and ‘should not’ say. I name these interactions ‘encounters of political listening.’ Throughout the thesis these encounters are analytically employed to explore the ways in which participants negotiated limits and controls to voice and visibility, in dialogue with one another and diverse project stakeholders.

The politics of listening

The ‘promise’ of digital storytelling has primarily focused not on listening, or even visibility per se, but on the power and possibility of ‘voice.’ But, what impact does ‘voice’ have, if no one is listening? After all, not listening is to exercise power (Bickford 1996: 3). ‘Entrenched hierarchies of voice’ (Dreher 2009: 446) that enable and sustain the privilege to not listen constitute a complex site of conflict. In the digital storytelling literature, conflict and adversarial communication are not associated with the feminist and critical practice of reclaiming experience. Instead, gaining control over the telling of a story, and the workshop site itself are assumed to be a supportive process, and an encouraging environment. Nevertheless, the practice of crafting and producing stories unfolds within a field of diverse, and at times, conflicting interests. Participants, facilitators, researchers, collaborating and funding agencies have different ideas about which stories to tell, who is best positioned to tell them, how they ‘should’ and ‘should not’ be told, and what’s at stake. Within this nexus of inter-dependent yet unequal relationships, an attention to the politics of listening offers conceptual inroads to critically consider the power asymmetries inherent in participatory knowledge production through media practice.

20 ‘Experience’ is a contested term. In her article ‘On Experience,’ Joan Scott argues against the use of the concept in ways that limit heterogeneity and nuance, and ultimately furthers understandings of gender that reproduce stereotypes and oppression (regarding ‘inherent’ qualities of ‘femininity’ and the erasure of difference through ‘universal sisterhood,’ for example). When thinking about the rich and productive uses of ‘experience,’ I am thinking about foundational social justice and anti-oppression theorists such as Audré Lorde, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. Their work broke ground for third wave feminist scholarship and queer theory, which furthers intimate and structural interrogation at the inter-section of difference.
Shaping my thinking on listening is the recent scholarship from a network of researchers who are developing a research agenda on listening (Couldry 2009; Dreher 2009; Husband 2009; O'Donnell, Lloyd & Dreher 2009). In ‘Listening across difference: Media and multiculturalism beyond the politics of voice,’ Tanja Dreher employs the concept of ‘political listening’ (Bickford 1996) to develop an agenda for listening ‘as a political process that is potentially difficult, conflictual and aimed at justice which sustains difference’ (Dreher 2009: 448). Dreher writes, ‘The interest in listening is situated and strategic, aiming to develop thinking on media change beyond increasingly predictable critiques of representation and a politics of speaking up which leaves the primary responsibility for change with those who are subjected to media racialization’ (2009: 447). In furthering this goal, the emphasis on listening shifts attention to issues of ‘receptivity and recognition and brings the discursively privileged into analysis’ (2009: 446).

For Susan Bickford (1996), thinking about listening is central to envisioning and developing democratic practices and democratic societies. Bickford understands both speaking and listening as activities central to citizenship, but foregrounds the need to theorise listening as a way to address the intersubjective nature of public life. She argues, ‘democratic communicative interaction depends not on the possibility of consensus, but on the presence of listening’ (1996: 18). She writes:

Political listening is not primarily a caring or amicable practice, and I emphasize this at the outset because “listening” tends immediately to evoke ideas of empathy and compassion. We cannot suppose that political actors are sympathetic toward one another in a conflictual context, yet it is precisely the presence of conflict and differences that makes communicative interaction necessary. This communicative interaction–speaking and listening together–does not necessarily resolve or do away with the conflicts that arise from uncertainty, inequality or identity. Rather, it enables political actors to decide democratically how to act in the face of conflict, and to clarify the nature of the conflict at hand (Bickford 1996: 2).

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21 See the special edition on listening in Continuum 23 (4) 2009.
The presence of listening, and ‘political listening,’ are evocative concepts when inquiry and practice unfold within a context of oppression, control, trauma and violence. In these cases, the workshop site and the creative inquiry involved in crafting a documentary essay can provide research participants with a sanctuary for possibility, and a community of practice within which to contextualise and recognise the act of storytelling. It can also provide a space for narrative exchange (Couldry 2010) in which participants share, reflect upon, re/create, and objectify lived experiences. From my perspective as a workshop facilitator and educator, the act of listening is essential to every stage of the production process. Listening to participants share and consider pivotal moments from their lives, and being present to the spectrum of emotion evoked by those experiences, is an intimate practice. It is a receptive art, but it is not passive. It demands an active awareness of one’s assumptions, and interest and curiosity about participants’ experiences, ideas, and emotions. The media learning, critical engagement with life histories, and exploration and analysis through the images that participants make in dialogue with their community of practice is facilitated through listening, viewing and speaking. Listening grounds the dialogic process of developing a narrative script and connecting images and sound. A satisfying editing experience is impossible without listening. In the research workshops, participants listened to themselves and each other, creating a dynamic and on-going first audience. But media producers, and facilitators/educators must not assume that these spaces and processes are inherently transformative, or free of the conflict that necessitates their development in the first place. As Bickford and Dreher remind us, not all audiences are created equal; ‘entrenched hierarchies of attention…produce unequal opportunities for speaking and being heard’ (Dreher 2009: 446). Some voices are more discursively privileged, making it necessary to
think seriously about listening in the presence of conflict. To reiterate Bickford (1996), the presence of inequality compels communicative interaction, and this speaking and listening together does not guarantee resolution to the conflicts arising from inequality. ‘Rather, it enables political actors to decide democratically how to act in the face of conflict, and to clarify the nature of the conflict at hand’ (Bickford 1996: 2). In circumstances when storytellers decide to be audible and visible through their stories, when there is a decisive call to be heard and recognized, this intention can productively inform our practice as anthropologists, social scientists, and media practitioners to be particularly attentive to encounters of political listening within and beyond the workshop site. In the following section, I widen the scope to discuss the research context of migration and asylum in Ireland, and the methodological adaptations that responded to this research context.

**Migration and asylum in Ireland**

Ireland is most often associated with large-scale emigration. The Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (2009)\(^\text{22}\) states that ‘Between 1871 and 1961, the average annual net emigration from Ireland consistently exceeded the natural increase in the Irish population, which shrank from about 4.4 million people to 2.8 million people in 1961.’ Less considered is the fact that Ireland has long been a destination country of in-migration–from the historic migrations of Celts, Vikings, and Normans to the contemporary migrations of British, Italian, Jewish, Polish, Chinese, and Nigerian people (Lentin 2012). During the economic boom years known as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ (roughly 1995-2007), migration to the island increased significantly. These years brought unprecedented economic prosperity to certain sectors of society, economic policies that encouraged in-migration (Loyal 2011), and historic in-flows

of people from outside the European Union. From 1995 to 2000, approximately one quarter of a million people migrated to Ireland (Fanning & Mutwarasibo 2007: 440). Around half of these individuals were former emigrants, or ‘returned Irish’ (ibid). The remaining portion of migration into Ireland was comprised of labour migrants, students, EU and non-EU nationals, reuniting family members, refugees, and asylum seekers (Lentin 2007: 621).

Although asylum seekers were, and continue to be, a small percentage of this overall migrant population, the numbers of men and women seeking asylum pre ‘Celtic Tiger’ were exceptionally small, which made increases in numbers appear particularly significant. For example, statistics from the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner show that for the year 1994, 362 people sought asylum in Ireland. In 2002, the number of asylum applications peaked at 11,634 before decreasing dramatically every year thereafter. According to the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA), the agency responsible for accommodating asylum seekers in Ireland, as of January 2013, 4,861 people are living in 35 ‘accommodation centres’ in 17 counties across the Republic or Ireland.  

23 http://www.ria.gov.ie/ As stated on their website, “All asylum accommodation centers are operated by private companies under contract to RIA,” accessed June 27, 2014.
Figure 4. Screen shot from Crossing Over (2009), written and directed by Evelyn. “Just then Carolyn bursts into my room raging, swearing and cursing. “What again?” I ask. “Do you know my solicitor said my case would be great if I wasn’t a Nigerian?”

**Direct Provision Accommodation and Dispersal**

In April 2000 the Irish Government introduced what was termed an ‘emergency’ or provisional scheme of ‘Direct Provision Accommodation and Dispersal.’ 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. Under the new regime, individuals and families seeking protection are placed in privately run ‘accommodation centres,’ 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.24 In their first study of the scheme, the Free Legal Advice Centres (FLAC)

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24 The Reception and Integration agency (RIA) determined this figure in 2000. Since that time when the allowance was determined, the amount has not changed to reflect the current cost of living. The Department of Social Protection, through a Community Welfare Officer, administers the allowance funds. (Joyce, C. & Quinn, E. 2014: 17).
found that direct provision foments state-mediated economic and social exclusion, and ‘enforced passivity’ (FLAC 2003: 35). The FLAC report concludes that direct provision ‘is gravely detrimental to the human rights of a group of people lawfully present in the country, and to whom the government has moral and legal obligations under national and international law’ (FLAC 2003: 41). Furthermore, Kuhling and Keohane argue that the direct provision system ‘fosters an intergenerational cycle of structural dependency, since it reproduces a negative image of asylum seekers, and forecloses any possibility of a positive, constructive identity among seekers and their children’ (Kuhling and Keohane 2007: 58). Since the introduction of direct provision, scholars (Fanning 2001, 2002; Iroh 2008; Loyal 2011), legal advocacy (FLAC 2003; 2010), nongovernmental organisations,25 and filmmakers26 have studied, analysed and documented the failings of the policy. Their efforts have largely fallen on deaf ears. As former Irish Ombudsman Emily O’Reilly noted, ‘We have known for a decade and more that our treatment of asylum seekers is unacceptable and we have failed, mostly, to do anything about it’ (2013: 8). In her article critiquing Irish asylum policy, O’Reilly begins,

There is growing, if belated, recognition that how we treat asylum seekers is a cause of very real concern. Retired Supreme Court judge, Catherine McGuinness, recently predicted that at some future point the government will find it necessary to apologise publicly for the damage done, in particular, to the children of asylum seekers–just as it has had to apologise to former residents of industrial schools and the Magdalene laundries who were the victims of abuse as well as of State indifference (2013: 1).

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25 In its 2003 report, FLAC notes The Irish Council for Civil Liberties as describing the Direct Provision scheme as “discriminatory and unnecessary.” The Conference of Religious in Ireland warns of the “danger of “ghettoization” in their report. Amnesty International Ireland writes that the scheme “discriminates against a section of the population that is already vulnerable.” The Irish Refugee Council critiques the scheme as “inhumane, discriminatory and economically unsound” (FLAC 2003: 36). See also Am Only Saying it Now: Experiences of Women Seeking Asylum in Ireland, AkiDwa, March 2010.

26 See documentaries No Man’s Land (2001), and Seaview (2008).
Over the 15 years during which the direct provision system has operated, significant questions and concerns have been raised about how the system negatively impacts on the health and wellbeing of asylum seeking individuals, children and families. At the same time, there appears to be an on-going lack of serious and sustained effort toward developing policy alternatives to the direct provision system that would guarantee the dignity, wellbeing and inclusion of people who are lawfully present in the country. Here, it might be helpful to contextualize asylum policy within the broader story of international and European human rights obligations.

Ireland joined the United Nations in 1955 and acceded to the 1951 UN Convention on Human Rights Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1956.\(^{27}\) It is important to note, however, that until the 1990s, no legal or administrative infrastructure for asylum seekers was put in place to fulfil the country’s obligations under the UN convention (Fanning 2002: 108). Fanning situates this negligence within a broader legacy of exclusionary state practices, and racism (2002: 87-111). He notes the way in which a media discourse of crisis and criminalization have ultimately served administrative and political purposes. In particular, he argues that government officials charged with being politically responsible to asylum seekers, have fostered instead the notion of an ‘emergency’ or ‘imaginary of crisis,’ which has served to negate responsibility for long-standing infrastructural responsibilities and failures, and place blame on asylum seekers themselves. He writes:

Asylum seekers were depicted as welfare scroungers in competition with indigenous groups for welfare resources. This state discourse was widely echoed in the media with the consequence that an administrative ‘crisis’ was represented as a crisis for Irish Society. This set up an equation whereby criticisms of infrastructural failure were countered with statements by politicians and officials that portrayed asylum seekers as deviant and dangerous. In this way racism in Irish society was mobilized for political and administrative purposes (2002: 101).

Loyal (2011) similarly notes that the state discourse regarding asylum seekers, ‘amplified and extended through the media, portrayed the arrival of asylum-seekers as constituting a ‘crisis’ bordering on a national emergency’ (2011: 104). He writes that media and political campaigns developed ‘a sustained campaign of defining asylum-seekers as ‘spongers’

…responsible for crime, the housing crisis, a threat to the social order, and as a general social malaise affecting the country. The result of these political and media discourses, together with an ever-quickening rise in numbers, was a ratcheting up the restrictions against asylum-seekers and a rise in racism towards them. Both the government and media made much of the putative difference between ‘genuine’ refugees of whom there are few, and ‘bogus’ refugees, of whom there are too many’ (2011: 103).

Throughout the European Union where all member states are signatories to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, these legal obligations are often negated and contradicted in practice (Feldman 2012). Feldman cites the outsourcing of migration controls to countries that have weak traditions of refugee protection, the introduction of stringent visa requirements in sending nations, and policies that isolate, marginalize, and criminalize those who successfully reach Europe, and seek asylum. Racist discourse and the ‘imaginary of crisis’ regarding ‘hordes’ of ‘illegal’ immigrants are also mobilized by a spectrum of conservative political parties.28 This irrational focus on ‘crisis’ shifts attention from more productive discussion regarding immigration and policy alternatives. As Zolberg (2001) argues, ‘Indeed, the prevailing sense of an “international migration crisis” has profoundly inflected the consideration of policy alternatives. In particular, it has been invoked to justify draconian measures to protect national borders,

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28 For example, the Swiss People’s Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei) in Switzerland, the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid) in the Netherlands, the National Democratic Party (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands) in Germany, the Jobbik party in Hungary (Jobbik Magyarországi Mozgalom), the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party in Greece, and Italy’s Northern League (Lega Nord), among others.
even at the expense of other considerations, notably humanitarian obligations toward refugees and generous policies of family reunion’ (2001: 1).

The limit figure

In his book, The Art of Listening, Les Back argues that the challenge of the twenty-first century is the division of the ‘immigration line.’ He writes,

This is certainly Europe’s problem, but it is also a global issue, the proportions of which are only just beginning to emerge. The immigration line is just as vexed politically, ontologically and practically as the line of colour or race. Indeed, it is deeply implicated in the legacy of racisms past and present and the foundational principles of citizenship and state formation. The problem of the immigration line is also the problem of the ways in which lines are drawn through and across the peoples of the world. I want to say that this is not about the ethnic or cultural qualities of so-called ‘immigrants’ rather it is concerned with the ways in which the immigrant serves as a limit figure in political life. The immigration line demarcates those lives that are endowed with the gift of citizenship and those lives that can be cut short with silent impunity. The life that is licensed by the work of the state is linked and implicated in the diminished life of people caught, often fatally, at the border (Back 2007: 31).

Giorgio Agamben names the limit figure ‘homo sacer’ whose bare life—the life stripped of form and value—is determined by the ways in which power ‘penetrates subjects’ very bodies and existence’ (1998: 5). The claim for asylum penetrates the lives of individuals and families who seek protection; asylum seekers are classified and defined through the juridico-institutional relationship to the nation state. The burden of proof is carried on the migrating body, located in the asylum story, and scrutinized for ‘truthfulness’ by state apparatuses that increasingly disbelieve the very legitimacy of the right to asylum (Fassin 2011). Didier Fassin argues,

...as asylum is disqualified both quantitatively and qualitatively, states develop increasingly sophisticated instruments to scrutinize the “truth” of the applicants who, in the great majority of cases, will be rejected and end up added to the pool of illegal aliens after they have exhausted every possible appeal. They will thus confirm empirically the increasing convergence of the politics of immigration and of asylum, in

29 For documentary treatment of these issues see La Forteresse (2008) and Vol. Special (2011).
spite of the official affirmation to the contrary (2011: 221).

In Ireland, the truthfulness of the asylum seeker’s claim is most often disbelieved. According to Eurostat statistics, with a 1.3% acceptance rate of claims for refugee status, Ireland has the lowest acceptance rate in the European Union. Only two research participants had received refugee status at the time of the research. All other participants were in different stages of appeal and feared losing legal status and ultimately, deportation.

Figure 5. On site at Mosney, one of the accommodation centres. Children played as their family members and aunts documented the site and considered different images for their documentary essays.

**Speaking back to imaginaries of crisis: ‘If they knew how we really lived’**

When I first began meeting with potential research participants–people from diasporic communities with diverse legal status in relation to the Irish state–the majority of people expressed concerns about the ways their experiences and stories as ‘undocumented workers’

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‘asylum seekers’ and ‘refugees’ were being framed and utilised in one-dimensional ways by mainstream media. They were critical of how their lives were most often negatively depicted in Irish media (field notes, July 9, 2007). They voiced concern about widespread misinformation regarding ‘benefits’ for asylum seekers, noting public accusations, and false claims about asylum seekers receiving free cell phones and living luxuriously at the expense of taxpayers. They told of incidents of race-based verbal harassment and intimidation. Participants reasoned that misrepresentation, ignorance, and misinformation about asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers, and the topic of immigration in general, urgently needed more inclusive dialogue—dialogue that included their voices. The people I spoke with expressed interest in the possibilities of self and group representation, and ultimately, recognition of their concerns as asylum seekers. As Susan, one research participant, wondered, ‘If they knew how we really lived, things might be different’ (field notes, September 16, 2008).

‘Migrant’ Voices

In addition to interest in the possibilities of self and group representation, other participants conveyed apprehension and caution in the face of requests from NGOs to ‘tell your story’ during campaigns employing ‘migrant voices.’ These participants expressed a need to ‘get on with life’ as people struggling to gain legal status, create new identities, build careers, re-unite family members, develop new relationships, and raise children. One participant in particular, Edwina, explained how she felt pressured, or at the very least, a certain obligation to ‘tell your story’ during campaign events. This participant disliked public speaking—it felt uncomfortable and vulnerable. Interestingly enough, the tension between ‘telling’ and ‘getting on with life’ fuelled her interest to participate in the research workshops. She theorized documentary storytelling as a way to gain greater control over the request, or even
the implicit demand to ‘tell your story.’ She liked the idea of having more time to critically engage with her experiences, and to select the ‘right’ words that would shape a selected story and define a particular moment and time in her life. In addition to the authoring and editing processes, she had also considered the finished, final artefact. She conceptualized her digital story as an object that would ‘speak for’ her in absentia and free her from publicly representing her story in person (field notes, 9 July 2007).

**Storytelling—to what end?**

For those who study migration and write about asylum, the overarching processes that categorize the legal status of the migrating body and determine his or her fate raise complex discursive, epistemological and ethical questions. As anthropologist Michael Jackson argues, ‘The problem for anyone writing about refugees (or asylum seekers) is one of avoiding the discursive conventions that conspire to reinforce the colonising and stigmatising processes’ (Jackson 2002: 78). He asks:

Given the plethora of academic essays, white papers, and compendious monographs devoted to refugee (and asylum) issues, why are there so few studies that give voice to and work from the lived experience of refugees (and asylum seekers) themselves? To what extent do we, in the countries of immigration, unwittingly reduce refugees to objects, ciphers, and categories in the way we talk and write about them, in roughly the same way that indifferent bureaucracies and institutional forces strip away the rights of refugees to speak and act in worlds of their own making? (2002: 80).

Jackson (2002) suggests working from the lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers themselves, identifying the act of storytelling as one generative starting point. Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s 1958 analysis of storytelling as a transformative strategy enmeshing private to public meanings, he furthers an existential purpose for storytelling. By reconsidering and actively reconstituting stories through collective and internal dialogues, the storyteller can develop a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. ‘To reconstitute
events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity,’ Jackson writes, ‘but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one’s own imagination’ (Jackson 2002: 15). But Jackson cautions against simplistic understandings of storytelling, arguing that there is nothing necessarily, or inherently transformative about ‘telling your story.’ Instead, central to this position—both Arendt’s and Jackson’s—is the importance of being heard. As Jackson points out, ‘there is no automatic or magical efficacy in speaking one’s mind unless the institutional framework of a community, a profession, or religion, contextualizes and recognizes the act’ (Jackson 2002: 4). Media theorist Jean Burgess similarly argues, ‘the question that we ask about ‘democratic’ media participation can no longer be limited to ‘who gets to speak?’ We must also ask ‘who is heard, and to what end?’ (Burgess 2006: 203). Nick Couldry echoes this concern when he points out, ‘the issue is what governments do with voice, once expressed: are they prepared to change the way they make policy?’ (Couldry 2010: 146). Of course, what is ‘done’ with a story is not easily determined, or shaped. In their discussion of the uses of life narratives in human rights initiatives, Schaffer and Smith (2004) discuss the challenges of ‘getting voices heard.’ They observe,

Storytellers take risks. They hope for an audience willing to acknowledge the truthfulness of the story and to accept the ethical responsibility to both story and teller. There is always the possibility however, that their stories will not find audiences willing to listen or that audiences will ignore or interpret their stories unsympathetically (2004: 6).

As a means of increasing the possibility that participants’ stories would find audiences, greater attention to the production values of the documentary essays was considered an ethical adaptation to the standard CDS model. In the following section, other adaptations that re-envisioned the model as a means for inquiry are discussed.
Inquiry adaptations to Digital Storytelling

To serve the needs of research participants, and develop digital storytelling as a research method—a relatively new project within the humanities and social sciences (Alexandra 2008; Brushwood Rose 2009; Gubrium 2009a, 2009b, Gubrium & Turner 2010; Gubrium & Harper 2013; Hartley & McWilliam 2009; Hill 2014; Hull & Katz 2006; Lundby 2008; Meadows 2003; Poitras Pratt 2011)—the adaptations outlined below proved necessary. These adaptations invited more in-depth and sustained inquiry (both visual and narrative). They permitted the method to serve 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 objects they created, and the exploratory and contextualising dialogue that developed over the course of the longitudinal research. Five research adaptations are outlined in the following section.

A longitudinal workshop format

Instead of the standard Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) 1–3 day timeframe, participants met weekly at a Dublin college over a half-year period. During the workshop, participants developed, screened and discussed their images, concepts, scripts and rough cuts. The interdisciplinary 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.

The standard format of 1-3 days would not have provided the necessary time to develop ethnographic relationships of trust and reciprocity, or explore the possibilities of
audio-visual 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—through ethnographic field notes and images.

**Participatory visual ethnography**

In the discussion of methodological adaptations made to Australian digital storytelling projects (Spurgeon et al. 2009), the authors do not discuss the development, or incorporation of social documentary and arts practices that centre the visual. This echoes a significant, and persistent oversight among media and education scholars who analyse or conduct research involving digital storytelling—careful attention to the artefact and to the role of the audio-visual in facilitating critical inquiry. Meanwhile, until very recently, participatory digital storytelling research has been largely absent from the academic and practice-based engagements with photography and film in the visual anthropology literature. Among practitioners, 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 word can run the risk of developing a primarily illustrative engagement with the visual. For example, when I first began facilitating digital storytelling workshops in 1999, the CDS curriculum that guided our work did not include careful consideration of photography, nor sufficient time for making

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31 However, this constitutes a steadily growing research area. See for example Gubrium et al (Eds), *Engaging Participatory Visual and Digital Research* (forthcoming) and Thornburg et al (Eds), *Deep Stories: Practicing, Teaching and Learning Anthropology with Digital Storytelling* (forthcoming).
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 composition, 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, and humorous 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. I became interested in what people might encounter, or learn from their stories if they had more time to explore the visual worlds of their oral and written narratives. Furthermore, might some storytellers want to begin the inquiry and production process with their images? How might the process be strengthened—technologically, creatively and pedagogically—to encourage a dialogical engagement with the visual; to build more exploratory pathways between the story as first expressed during the story circle, the unfolding inquiry and discovery that occurs throughout the production process, and the final, audio-visual object?

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 in Ireland. 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, professional photographers visited the workshop site to share their photographic practice, talk about the images participants had created, and document the workshop site. 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 provision centres where they lived in order to develop a participatory, visual ethnographic practice. Research participants created the images themselves, or sourced them from their personal archives. In this way, participants actively considered the visual worlds of their stories, employing photography as a form of inquiry.

**Valuing practice and artefact**

The CDS has tended to place greater value on the workshop process than the finished artefact (Sanchez-Laws 2010). School and community-based digital storytelling projects often produce artefacts with low production values (poor sound recording, and limited attention to visual storytelling). This might have something to do with why so few digital stories are screened beyond the workshop site. Because asylum ‘voices’ are often rendered inaudible (Threadgold 2006; Moreo 2012), and because research participants expressed interest in impacting migrant labour and asylum policies through their audio-visual compositions, 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 professional-level 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, as participants determined what they would, and would not, reveal and/or conceal, and made on-going dialogue about visibility, ‘veracity’ and ‘evidence’ necessary.

Upon completion of the stories, participants had the opportunity to screen their stories publicly in diverse venues, or opt out of public dissemination. Currently, ten stories are
available for viewing online.

Thinking about sound

Digital stories most often depend on the filmmaker’s voice to orient the viewer, and organise the film, and an expressive musical sound track often accompanies the voice. In the standard workshop setting, there is little time to consider the musical selection, and not always enough 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. For this project, I wanted to focus on the primacy of the research participant’s spoken words and voice, and invite the listener to hear the in-breaths, the pauses between the words, and the emotions present in the voice. Therefore, no music was added to the audio tracks. Ambient sounds were added during post-production in conversation with the photographs and images. These sounds were not synchronous, but had an indexical link to the image in the video—for example, the sound of cutlery clinking in Zaman’s Story, or 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 participants, and rich possibilities for sonic ethnography.\(^{32}\)

Responsive pedagogy: Commitment to narrative diversity

To provide greater opportunities for participants to develop diverse narrative and visual approaches to their lived experiences, I did not teach the standard CDS ‘7 Steps Approach

\(^{32}\) For studies on the voice and sound in film see Chion (1999; 1994). In ethnographic film, see for example, Henley (2007), and in sensory ethnography see for example, the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University (http://sel.fas.harvard.edu). Accessed September 15, 2014.
to Storytelling.33 Furthermore, due to the particular circumstances of research participants
during the Living in Direct Provision: 9 Stories workshop, I did not facilitate a CDS-style ‘Story
Circle.’ Instead, I developed a longitudinal seminar in which participants could document
and reflect upon their lives through different writing and photography activities, and develop
their narratives in ways that would not necessarily have a ‘beginning,’ ‘middle,’ and ‘end.’ The
‘7 Steps Approach’ can be understood as a guide, which represents a largely European and
Western understanding of storytelling, and one that is based on experience and thoughtful
consideration by CDS practitioners. Ideally, the guide would be taught along with other
perspectives and approaches to storytelling, and this knowledge would be elicited from
research participants during the workshop. However, I was primarily conscious of wanting
to learn from participants about how they would shape and define their stories, and worried
that the ‘7 Steps’ might determine their practice too much. By presenting a more responsive
curriculum in which I developed discussion based on participant’s images and scripts as they
were made, it was my hope that participants would develop their own visual vocabulary and
practice as media ethnographers, and learn how to tell audio-visual stories through a critical
engagement with their ideas, emotions, and artefacts, and those of their peers.

Conclusion

In her article, Images, Senses, and Applications: Engaging Visual Anthropology, Sarah Pink (2011)
situates visual anthropological methods at the intersection of applied, activist, public and
interdisciplinary anthropologies. Pink defines ‘participatory’ visual anthropological methods
as those that seek to co-produce information, knowledge and expertise, and to critically

33 The original 7 steps included: point of view; dramatic question; emotional content; the gift of your voice; the
power of the soundtrack; economy; and pacing (Lambert 2002: 45-60). In the latest digital storytelling
‘cookbook’ the steps are listed as follows: owning your insights; owning your emotions; finding the moment;
seeing your story; hearing your story; assembling your story; and assembling your story (Lambert 2013: 53-69).
engage the structures and hierarchies of said production. Additionally, participatory ‘applied anthropology seeks to make interventions that are based on the knowledge and needs of collaborators, and at times, reach wider publics’ (2011: 442). Pink’s definition well describes the research methodology, which responded to participants’ concerns and context. The development of a participatory research practice provided practitioners with the space and time to interrogate migration policy and engage with lived experiences—through scriptwriting, image making, and audio-visual editing as the central method of inquiry. In this way, information, knowledge and expertise were critically authored and co-produced among a community of practice. Hence, the development of a methodology that centred people from diasporic communities as the authors/directors and co-producers of their migration stories, actively involved research participants in the inquiry process, and placed the tools of production in the hands of the storytellers themselves provided a responsive, dialogical model. It broke ground for an approach that would work from the lived experiences of refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants through the development of a co-creative documentary practice. This practice is multi-faceted and complex; it is decidedly not a simple or naïve matter of ‘giving voice to the voiceless’ subaltern research subjects. Rather, as this thesis argues, it is a matter of critically engaging the politics of listening, particularly encounters of political listening, which reveal power asymmetries from within and across the research site.

Like Malik, another participant discussed how external forces and rumours had impacted her thinking and actions regarding participation. During an interview, she discussed her initial apprehension toward participation and storytelling in this context.

I wasn’t comfortable talking about my story. I didn’t know if I could talk about it. I thought, ‘Let it stay with Justice, that’s where it belongs.’ Here (in Direct Provision) there’s always something hanging over your head. You hear rumours about what not to do—‘Don’t do this.’ ‘Don’t do that.’ ‘If you speak out, if you rock the boat, you’ll have
trouble.’ You’re pushed to the wall. But you want to make a difference. You want something to change. The system is still more powerful, but you take the chance anyway. I wasn’t sure, but slowly the fear started to fade (Interview with Susan, February 1, 2012).

Susan and Malik responded in different ways to fears about how participation, and the act of speaking visibly might impact their legal claim, their living conditions, and their lives. In the end, Malik decided not to continue the workshop. Although he did not create an audio-visual composition, he shared his insights and counsel with research participants. As such, he shaped and informed the research. Susan was among the nine participants who decided to continue.

Stories

Please view *Caged Escape* by Susan, and *An Island Called Ireland* by Pierre available online at:

Chapter 2
Undocumented in Ireland: Theorising practice

Until recently, most victims have passively allowed themselves to be transformed into aesthetic creations, news items, and objects of our pity and concern. Society condones this action because it is assumed that the act of filming will do some good—cause something to be done about the problems (Ruby 1991:52).

In contrast to top-down approaches in which policy makers, academics and others may generalize an experience for a targeted community, digital storytelling allows participants to construct and represent their own experiences’ (Gubrium 2009: 8).

Figure 6. Image taken at the first story circle during the first digital storytelling participatory research workshop in Dublin, August 2007. Participants agreed to the photo, on the condition that faces would not be photographed. Participants did not consent to audio or video recordings of our workshop interactions.

In this chapter, two participants–Edwina and Zaman from the Undocumented in Ireland workshop series–are foregrounded to explore the ways in which audio-visual production served as a form of inquiry, and how participants theorised their audio-visual artefact and practice.
The people who self-selected to participate in the digital storytelling research that resulted in *Undocumented in Ireland: Our Stories*, had travelled to Ireland with hopes of building a better future for themselves and their families—professionally and educationally. Abdel, a husband and father of two children, came from Morocco. Lyubov, a mother of two adult children, came from the Ukraine. Edwina travelled from Zimbabwe with her son. Zaman, a single man in his thirties, came from Bangladesh. They entered Ireland legally with valid work permits. As non-EU nationals, their permission to live and work in Ireland was tied to their work permit, which bound them to a specific employer. If their employer broke the law through workplace discrimination, exploitation, or employer deception concerning the nature and conditions of labour, the worker faced a difficult question. How to respond? If she chose to advocate for her labour rights, organise with a union, or resign, she risked losing her permit to work. If she could not subsequently find another employer willing to apply for a new work permit, she would lose her legal status, and become undocumented.

Precisely due to the aforementioned circumstances, Abdel, Lyubov, Edwina, and Zaman had all become undocumented at one stage or another. As Abdel writes in his script:

> The wages were poor; the work was hard and unacceptable. I worked long hours without sleeping. I had no breaks. All these things were putting me under pressure, especially when my wife came over and gave birth to our baby daughter. At this time I asked my boss to raise my wages to 8 euro an hour. He refused. I was in shock. After a long conversation I realized he was not going to renew my work permit. I left him and after one month I found another employer. I applied with a valid visa when my work permit expired, and I was refused. That’s when I became undocumented in the country that let me down, struggling once again (From the digital story, *Abdel’s Story*, 2007).

In 2007 the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) spearheaded a Bridging Visa Campaign for workers in these perilous situations who had ‘fallen out of legality due to circumstances
beyond their control. The proposed Bridging Visa would provide a ‘route back into the system’—a temporary stamp for individuals from non-EU/EEA nations who had entered Ireland legally, and on a valid work permit, but for reasons beyond their control had become undocumented. Digital storytelling research participants were active members of the Bridging Visa Campaign when they agreed to meet weekly, and begin authoring their audio-visual stories.

**Authoring meaning, creating objects of thought**

Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem (Foucault 1984: 388).

In his discussion of digital storytelling in educational contexts, Patrick Lowenthal points out that ‘digital storytelling is not a panacea; it is the pedagogy and not the technology that make the difference’ (cited in Hartley & McWilliam 2009: 257). In this research, critical pedagogy underpinned the methodology in which the establishment of an object of thought, and the act of stepping back to reflect and pose problems in relation to that object are central. A pedagogical approach that is ‘critical’ is collaboratively developed, based upon the interests, and concerns of participants, and driven by epistemological curiosity and rigorous dialogue (Freire 1970, 1998; Freire & Macedo 1995; Darder 2002). Critical pedagogy is an approach to learning and teaching that focuses on understanding the relationship between power and knowledge; asks how and why knowledge is constructed; and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimised and celebrated, while others are not (McLaren 2006).

34 Here I appropriate language common in the discourse of the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) in relation to undocumented migrants.
Peter McLaren proposes that critical pedagogy begins with the authoring of meaning. He writes:

A critical and affirming pedagogy has to be constructed around the stories that people tell, the ways in which students and teachers author meaning, and the possibilities that underlie the experiences that shape their voices. It is around the concept of voice that a theory of both teaching and learning can take place, one that points to new forms of social relations and to new and challenging ways of confronting every day life (McLaren [1998] 2006: 220).

Critical pedagogy is not a method per se, but rather, a position toward, or practice of teaching and learning, and imagining oneself in the world (Giroux 2011). In this approach, McLaren’s ‘concept of voice’ is approximated through the centring of story, an attention to the ways in which meaning is authored, and a critical engagement with the experiences, and context that ‘shape voice.’ This approach to inquiry, in turn, posits new ways for challenging inequalities, and affecting social change. Based on her work with systemically marginalised youth in the Eastern United States, participatory action research theorist Michelle Fine conceptualises critical pedagogy as an approach to inquiry that seeks to challenge, resist, and present possibilities. Through a practice of critical pedagogy a purposeful public space is created where people, ‘Come together to critique what is, shelter themselves from what has been, redesign what might be and/or imagine what could be’ (Fine et al. 2000: 133). These concepts of a collectively constructed public space for critical thought, shelter, and imagination well describe the pedagogical practice of the research.

The late Brazilian educator and foundational theorist of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire introduced ‘education as the practice of freedom’ in his classic text, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). Freire positions education as the practice of freedom in opposition to the

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35 See also: Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2008; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Giroux 2011; Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., & Del Carmen Casaperalta, E. 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995.

36 See also Greene, 1995, 1998.
‘banking model’ of education in which educators deposit knowledge and expertise into the minds of docile students (Freire 1970: 59). Within the dialogical, liberatory model, educators investigate together with students—posing ‘generative themes,’ producing codes, and ‘problem posing’ these themes and codes—in order to facilitate reflection, dialogue, and the affirmation of a critical and agentive self in relation to the world (Freire 1970: 83-100).

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (Freire 1970: 83).

In this pedagogical circuitry, codes are an important unit to consider. Codes serve as tools for thought, and the practice of ‘de-codification’ or ‘problem posing’ as a means to objectify systemic problems, rather than objectifying the person or people facing the problem. In turn, these codes—as objects—not only open possibilities for thought and dialogue around issues of power, violence, and inequality, but also potential personal transformation and societal change (Auerbach 1992). Contrary to a teacher-centred approach in which the educator develops and presents codes that s/he produces in dialogue with students—a photograph, drawing, statistic, poem, article, song, film clip, etcetera—in this project, research participants developed their own objects of thought, which were subsequently considered in rigorous dialogue. By developing their photography and scripts and directing and editing their documentary essays, participants critically engaged and objectified their diverse realities as migrants. These narratives, in turn, rooted the story to the objects produced—shifting the objectification to the story itself—and the process of crafting that story. The embodied object served to author meaning, and the co-creative media practice provided a platform for storytellers to reflexively engage with lived experiences and memories in heterogeneous, emotionally textured ways. This process—contemplating ideas and emotions surrounding
stories through image-making and script-writing, developing connections and discovering ruptures between images and words (Brushwood Rose 2009), and the overall editing of the audio-visual story—provided a means of personal and collective inquiry.

**Edwina’s story: Embodying the object**

Particularly in the case of participant researchers who developed visual anonymity in their stories, and conceptualised the digital story as performing the labour of ‘speaking for them,’ the artefact is imagined as ‘embodied’ in that it carries the intent of the author at the moment she/he crafted the story and yet it changes over time, across contexts, and among viewers. As an example, we will consider the following case study of Edwina.

Edwina left the economic and political turmoil 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. She writes:

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 (Edwina’s Story, 2007).

In her self-narrated story, Edwina details the workplace discrimination, exploitation, and unjustified dismissal that lead to the loss of her work permit, and the beginning of her experiences as an undocumented migrant.

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 breaks 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 was 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.
became undocumented and this was the beginning of a runaway roller coaster nightmare (From the digital story, *Edwina’s Story*, 2007).

When I first spoke with Edwina and other members of the Bridging Visa Campaign, she was among those who expressed concern about the portrayal of migrant worker experiences and stories in mainstream Irish media, and voiced interest in the possibilities of self and group representation as a response to the problem (field notes 9 July 2007). Edwina also raised a concern that other migrants in her situation faced. She explained how she felt pressured, or at the very least, a certain obligation to ‘tell my story’ during advocacy campaign meetings and events. She disliked public speaking—it felt uncomfortable, and vulnerable.

The tension between ‘telling my story’ during campaigns employing ‘migrant voices,’ and ‘getting on with life,’ as individuals struggling to gain legal status, develop new identities, build careers, re-unite family members, establish new relationships, and raise children was one that surfaced in both digital storytelling workshops. For Edwina, the challenge fuelled her interest to participate in the research workshops—she saw documentary storytelling as a way to gain greater control over the request, or even the implicit demand to ‘tell your story.’ She liked the idea of having more time to think about, and select the ‘right’ words to define a particular story, and a particular moment in her life. In addition to the authoring, and editing processes, Edwina had also considered the end result. She conceptualised her digital story as an object that would ‘speak for’ her in absentia; it would free her from publicly representing her story in person (field notes, 9 July 2007).

Following Edwina’s lead, we might conceptualise the ‘digital’ story as a kind of ‘embodied’ object. A digital story viewed on-line does not have the materiality of a photograph that is hung on the wall, or set in a family album. However, citing Régis Durand (1995), Susan Sontag (1979), Jean Baudrillard (1994), and Walter Benjamin, Edwards and
Hart (2004) point out that for many decades, writing on photography has ‘resonated with references to the photograph as object’ (2004: 1). In their edited volume the authors argue that ‘acknowledging the material makes the act of viewing more complex…An approach that acknowledges the centrality of materiality allows one to look at and use images as socially salient objects, as active and reciprocal rather than simply implications of authority, control and passive consumption on the one hand, or of aesthetic discourse and the supremacy of individual vision on the other…The material and social existence of photographs as objects forestalls such a reduction’ (Edwards & Hart 2004: 10). Following this argument, we might apply the material and social existence of the digital story as an object in process, and an object as product, or end result, that is nevertheless potentially in the making. In the first stage, throughout the production process, the digital story is ‘embodied’ in that it is crafted and edited from elements of life stories and photographs from ‘home.’ It is shaped through diverse stages of listening. It ‘embodies’ a particular moment in the storyteller’s life. As Catherine Russell points out,

...self-representation always involves a splitting of the self, a production of another self, another body, another camera, another time, another place (Russell 1999: 313).

In the next stage, conceptualising the documentary essay as an embodied object speaks to the unpredictable social and political life of any given story. If the storyteller decides to publish the story beyond the workshop site, it migrates without the storyteller—from a workshop site of possibility, and even sanctuary, towards potential containment and/or impact on the borders of diverse public realms. The story develops a trajectory of its own as it is shared, viewed and interpreted in diverse contexts, and among diverse audiences. This theory of practice that includes the relationship to a material and embodied object provides an alternative to, as Jay Ruby critiqued, the production of a ‘passive victim’ who is ‘transformed into aesthetic creations, news items, and objects of our pity and concern’ (Ruby
For the storyteller, the assumption that ‘something will be done’ in response to the story—the knowledge and emotion that is re/presented through the story—remains, but the ‘passive victim’ is no longer the object. Instead, the storyteller is the central author, and co-producer of her object; she literally objectifies her experiences into aesthetic creation.

Finally, there is a productive connection to be made between a critical pedagogy that centres the dialogical crafting of an object of thought and expression (that potentially travels beyond the workshop site as an ‘embodied’ object) with the development of a ‘sensuous scholarship’ (Stoller 1997). Drawing from his research in Sahelian West Africa, and in particular the imaginative labour and societal roles of Songhay Griots, Stoller discusses embodiment in relation to the development of a ‘sensuous scholarship’ (1997: 24-43). A sensuous scholarship acknowledges the embodied implications of scholarly representations through 1) a critical awareness of the senses; 2) an attentiveness to voice; and 3) a recognition of the increasingly political implications of our works… (1997: 34).

**Documenting story**

Over the course of the workshop, through the act of selecting, scripting and editing a story in a way that provided more control, I observed how some participants gained a greater sense of power over a story of circumstances beyond their control. During the first months of the workshop, Edwina would regularly arrive early. Together, we would prepare the classroom—turning on computers, organizing desktop files, and making the space more welcoming. We chatted about politics, local issues, and sometimes shared personal information about our families and backgrounds. On one of those evenings, Edwina told me she was excited about the workshop, and the possibility of raising awareness about the challenges that migrant workers face in Ireland (field notes, 14 August 2007). While discussing the circumstances of her legal status, she began to cry. The ill treatment she had
faced at work had impacted her self-esteem, and the racial harassment she experienced at
work proved traumatic. After the unjustified dismissal, it was painful to go from being a self-
reliant woman who sent money home, to one who depended financially on extended family
members. Her sisters provided an important source of emotional strength. Although they
didn’t say anything, Edwina worried about the financial strain.

‘I should be sending money home to my father,’ she said, beginning to cry.

I listened to Edwina, wondering how best to support her. We sat in silence for a little while.
I asked if she would read me the script she had prepared at home. She agreed. Her first
reading was tentative, but her writing was skilful and strong. I was immediately struck by her
succinct and descriptive prose. In 359 words she detailed her reasons for leaving her home
country, the workplace discrimination and exploitation that led to an irregular migratory
status, and the emotional trauma of living without legal documentation. She concluded her
script with a concrete policy recommendation. She writes:

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.

I asked Edwina if she would read her story to the workshop participants that evening,
underscoring that if it didn’t feel comfortable, she shouldn’t share. Edwina decided to read
her script that evening during workshop. All the participants had shared story ideas verbally
in the story circle the week prior, but no one had shared a script draft yet and most
participants were still in the writing and editing stages. Edwina was therefore the first to read
her script out loud, and it set a significant precedent. She confidently read her well-crafted prose with dignity and leadership. Afterwards, participants discussed her story, gave Edwina feedback and took inspiration from her writing (field notes, 14 August 2007).

From the time Edwina shared her first ideas during the initial story circle, to the moment she read her script to me before class, to the carefully crafted piece she read out loud to her peers, to the final documentary essay she viewed played back to her at the premiere screening, Edwina’s relationship to her story became visible, and observable. By self-consciously observing her experiences through the process of audio-visual documentation—Edwina’s relationship to her experiences of becoming undocumented shifted in significant ways. When I later interviewed Edwina about this process, she said the following:

The best part of the process was having the time to make the story. I get tongue-tied when I’m in the spotlight. I can’t express exactly what I mean when I’m on the spot, but taking my time, going at my own pace in the workshop and using my pictures to tell my story, it gave me (...) my digital story spoke for me. I could document my story and that was brilliant (interview, 20 January 2009).

In the above excerpt, Edwina confirms the importance of having the time and space to observe, indeed to ‘document’ her story in a way that was decidedly different than being ‘in the spotlight.’ By going at her own pace, and using images she created, Edwina critically engaged with disempowering, external circumstances to produce a story, which spoke to and for her. Her comment is a helpful touchstone from which to consider the qualitative differences of the research method, which was conducted ‘with’ as opposed to ‘on’ migrants. In this approach, digital storytelling research practitioners become participant-observers of their own lives (Gubrium 2009a).
One afternoon toward the end of the workshop, Edwina called from the MRCI office with good news—she had just received a Bridging Visa. She had to speak loudly to be heard over the background noise of friends and colleagues happily celebrating the victory.

More than words

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: 7).

Using more than words to find meaning (or to recognize the impossibility of finding meaning) participants were able to consider multiple frames—‘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 and camera movement and the dialogue and pacing between images. Over time, in this practice of inquiry through media production, participants who had no prior experience with image making 37 developed diverse approaches to conceptualising, representing and re-identifying themselves. Crafting the visual worlds of their stories—by thinking, sensing, and engaging with and through images—participants created multi-layered representations of Ireland, immigrant expressions of Ireland.

By the end of the Undocumented in Ireland workshop, Zaman and Edwina grew to enjoy the challenge and craft of visual storytelling, and came to identify as documentary photographers. Lyubov and Abdel struggled more, but gained satisfaction with the way they were able to audio-visually render their stories. In addition to treasured family photos of her

37 Adrian, who is a photographer and artist, was one exception and he mentored his colleagues during the workshop.
mother and daughter, Lyubov presented material objects for consideration in her story—a flyer about mushroom pickers (figure 7), and an Oberikh, a ‘symbol of safe homecoming,’ that her colleagues had given her when she journeyed to Ireland (figure 8). These objects alternatively represent the hope of migration (and return), and the reality Lyubov faces as she organised for her rights as a migrant worker.

Figure 7. Screen shot from Lyubov’s Story, 2007. This image was created using an MRCI flyer depicting a mushroom worker. Lyubov had folded the flyer and carried it in her purse. The crease marks from the fold are visible in the scanned image. The coins were added in postproduction to underscore the economic hardships Lyubov faced as a Ukrainian migrant worker.
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. After a hard life in Morocco, my friends advised me to go to Ireland for a change and better life. One of my friends prepared my travel visa and my work permit so I could come to Ireland legally. With the hopes to find what I was looking for I left my family, my mum, my dad and brothers (Abdel’s Story, 2007).

In the first sentence of his script, Abdel foreshadows the challenges he would encounter in Ireland. The entirety of his script outlines a desire for new beginnings, his persistence in negotiating labour immigration policy, and his hope beyond belief that he will regain legal status. Instead of directly illustrating the workplace exploitation he speaks to in his story, Abdel exclusively selected images from his family archive. In this way, he employs a parallel, and equally evocative story about his love and concern for his wife and children (figures 9–10). The visual story–images of his young family in Ireland–underscores precisely what is at stake for him as he organises for his rights as a migrant worker. As Abdel points out, ‘My family, they are the reason I do all this’ (interview 20 January 2009).
Figure 9. Screen shot from *Abdel’s Story*, 2007. ‘I started looking again for an employer who can apply for me, but it was especially hard to find someone because the government has established a new harder and more complicated law.’

Figure 10. Screen shot from *Abdel’s Story* (2007). ‘I finally found an employer who will apply for a work permit for me. I hope that I will get it.’ The images of the black birds from Abdel’s family photo became white birds in flight during the post-production phase, as directed in collaboration with Aodán O’Coileain.
Beyond visual evidence

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 storyteller protect and maintain her anonymity? These are precisely the questions that research participants faced as they shaped their stories. The questions provided participants with opportunities to move beyond the evidential, and to explore diverse ways of depicting their stories. In the process, images served as objects that facilitated a poetic engagement with past and present experiences.

For the visual treatment of her story, Edwina chose anonymity; family photos were completely out of the question. Like Abdel, Edwina’s finished audio-visual story does not visually illustrate the workplace discrimination and abuse that is discussed in the story; 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 present, everyday life in Dublin. When we first began discussing her visual script, Edwina focused on evidential images. This is a common first approach to engaging with the visual worlds of a story, especially for people who are new to audio-visual storytelling. For Edwina, her first images for ‘My country was going through some tough times and getting worse,’ depicted a nearly empty cupboard (figure 11). She also used graphs, and created collages from official documents (figure 12). As I got to know Edwina and learnt more about the ways in which becoming undocumented had lead to intense feelings of criminalisation and vulnerability, and as we discussed her image making process, I came to understand how these evidential images proved compelling. They provided ‘proof’ that the circumstances that lead to her migration, the discrimination she faced at work, and the loss of her work permit, were indisputable. A

38 For three completely different and truly extraordinary examples from documentary film see Tatiana Huezo’s, El Lugar Más Pequeño (2011), Patricio Guzman’s Nostalgia de la Luz (2009) and Joshua Oppenheimer’s The Act of Killing (2012) and The Look of Silence (2014).
graph, or official document could evidence Edwina’s lived experiences as she spoke to a ‘public that disbelieves’ (Valentine Daniel & Knudsen 1995). Edwina shared the first visual approaches to her story during the seminar (figures 11 & 12). Participants found the first photographs visually uninteresting, and confusing (field notes 6 October 2007). My sense was that the initial images detracted from the poignancy and emotional power of Edwina’s voice present in the recorded narration of her story. Based on this feedback, Edwina was open to the idea of continuing her photographic investigation. She agreed to keep taking photographs weekly, and looking for images from her daily life that might provide the evidential proof she was seeking (field notes 6 October 2007). Through the visual exploration of her story, she began to develop more evocative, metaphorical and ambiguous images.

She began 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—the lace covered window of her sitting room (figure 13), and the hallway corridor (figure 14). 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 would be apprehended, and deported. Edwina combined these interior shots with more impressionistic, and associative images—birds in flight (figure 18), rolling clouds, a candle flame (figure 19)—to create tension between the underlying themes of captivity, and self-determination in her story. She staged visual re-enactments of her story on the body: an open palm (figure 15), the gaze of an eye (figure 16), and hands bound with rope (figure 17), which is perhaps the most literal image in
this 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 18) and a cardboard kitchen roll that figures in her image of the ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ (figure 19). The vulnerability, defiance and openness of Edwina’s images provoked a resonant response from the other workshop participants; the images maintain anonymity and yet are intimately connected to Edwina, and the story she constructed.

Figure 11. One of the first images Edwina took to visually represent ‘my country was going through some tough times and getting worse.’
Figure 12. 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.

Figure 13. ‘As a single parent I wanted a better life for my son and myself.’
Figure 14. ‘We came to Ireland leaving family, friends and venturing into the unknown. Scared, but excited and not knowing what lay ahead for us.’

Figure 15. ‘I am not asking for handouts. I am willing and able to contribute to this society, something I have done all my life,’ Edwina’s Story, 2007.
Figure 16. Screen shot from *Edwina’s Story* (2007). ‘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.’

Figure 17. ‘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.’
Figure 18. Screen shot from *Edwina’s Story*, 2007. Edwina recommended concrete policy changes in her story: ‘The bridging visa and more action against employers who abuse their work permit power could be the answer to this roller coaster nightmare.’

Figure 19. ‘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 Story*, 2007. Edwina constructed this image at home using the cardboard tubing from a paper towel roll and a tea light. In the final digital story, Edwina wanted animation around the light to create a sense of change and possibility—something achieved in post-production.
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 editing her story gave her ‘more power’ in expressing her feelings and telling her story ‘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).

**Zaman’s story: Contesting ‘The Migrant Story’**

Facilitating a longitudinal workshop with participants actively involved in a national workers’ rights’ campaign, necessitated a particular and careful balance between understanding the objectives of the participating NGO, and supporting the agency of each storyteller in such a way that participants would have the freedom to creatively engage with their experiences on their own terms. As workshop facilitator, educator, and researcher my primary responsibility was to support the agency of each storyteller to choose and define the parameters of what she/he would reveal. Participants themselves selected the stories they would tell. This pedagogical and ethical responsibility required on-going conversation and negotiation with and between participants and collaborating agencies. Although participants’ stories implicitly, and at times explicitly, spoke to the need for policy changes, there was no expectation on my part that participants speak to any one particular issue, such as the policy recommendation of a Bridging Visa. However, collaborating community workers who were addressing their members’ immediate needs for regularisation and economic security understandably had different expectations.

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39 When these stories were screened with business and media undergraduate students at the DIT, the responses were overwhelmingly sympathetic to the storytellers. Several students expressed outrage that ‘the employers have all the power,’ other students remarked that there needed to be policies in which migrant workers were protected from their employers (field notes, 17 February 2009).
The development of Zaman’s story is a case in point. In 2002, Zaman paid several thousand euros to come to Ireland on a valid visa to work for an IT company. Upon arrival to Dublin from Dhaka, Bangladesh, he discovered that the IT company did not exist. In debt and without employment, he became undocumented. Zaman attended every workshop seminar, and often arrived up to an hour before the workshop’s scheduled time. At these times, Zaman would talk with me about his life and work in Dublin, the financial pressure of sending remittances back home to extended family members, and his terrible loneliness. It was his first time living so far away from his family, and Dublin seemed an impossibly solitary place to him. Once, when I asked how he liked the city, he looked at me as if I were asking a ridiculous question and replied, ‘People here live alone. They live alone.’ Zaman did not live alone; he shared accommodation with other men from Bangladesh, co-workers from the Indian restaurant where he worked. This living situation seemed to emphasise the absence of his immediate and extended family members back home, and his longing for a family of his own.

In the workshop, during the first drafting of Zaman’s script, I overheard one of the community workers suggest he change his story. She told him his story didn’t make sense, and that it wasn’t a ‘migration story.’ She suggested he select a different story to tell. Upholding my agreement with research participants that they would determine the story, I intervened by saying that Zaman had selected the story for a reason, and that it was his choice to make the final decision (field notes 18 September 2007).

Although awkward, this initial concern regarding Zaman’s story created an opportunity for political listening. In this case, it provided a chance to discuss the

40 Two community workers attended approximately 30% of the workshops, and one of the community workers sought further training in digital storytelling.
methodological and pedagogical ethos of the research, and for community workers to openly evaluate the process. Over time, collaborating community workers gained interest in a pedagogy that supported the storyteller’s agency to define and delineate their story (Interview with community worker, 11 December 2007). Toward the end of the workshop, during an informal discussion, the coordinator of the Bridging Visa Campaign told me how he had observed research practitioners sharing information and participating in ways that are uncommon in campaign and organisational settings. He concluded that the practice of making something, of crafting a story, made the difference. He explained,

They have something to build out from–they can connect to each other from the story they are making (field notes 18 December 2007).

This observation was echoed by research participants themselves–by Edwina and Zaman in the first workshop series, and later, by Evelyn and Susan during the second workshop series. Zaman’s story selection, and the question of what did and did not make a ‘migration story’ sparked discussion between research participants as well, to which I now turn.

The story Zaman told the group during the story circle at the beginning of the workshop and the scripted version of that story were very similar. Any change of syntax changed the cadence of the piece; therefore, the only edits to his script consisted of corrections around subject verb agreement, which were discussed and negotiated with Zaman. From his position as a migrant labourer living away from his family for the first time in his life, and working full time as a chef in an Indian restaurant, Zaman selected the following memory of a moment at home with his father. He wrote:

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.

One day, my father in the kitchen made some food for us. My father called me into the kitchen. He told me, ‘Come here son. You should learn to make your own food. I will show (you) how to make food.’ I thought about my father’s words. I said, ‘What
are you saying Baba? I’m not gonna’ be a chef. I’m going to be a computer engineer. My father told me, ‘Son, in the whole world you want to know about anything that’s good for you. Whether you choose to do them professionally or not. You need to learn about everything, even hard things.’

Yeah, he made me think. Now I’m used to making food and I’m an experienced chef. I can’t believe it. My father was like a philosopher and I feel so much, so much. My father used to tell me, ‘Son, when I’m passed you will feel me a lot.’ Exactly. I feel so much my father. He was right. But it is not possible for my papa to come back to me. Papa, can you hear me? I would like to talk to you just one more time.

In preparation for the audio recording of his documentary essay, Zaman recorded his reading of the script multiple times on his cell phone. He played the recordings back during workshop, and the urgency and eloquence of his performance was moving. Once in the audio studio, Zaman recorded a final version of his voiceover in one take.

During the workshop meetings, while discussing his story, Zaman told us that traditionally, the men in his family, and of his class did not learn to cook. When his father called him into the kitchen for a cooking lesson, Zaman was genuinely surprised, even shocked. As noted above in Zaman’s script, he asks his father,

‘What are you saying, Baba? I’m not going to be a chef, I’m going to be a computer engineer.’
Had Zaman’s father anticipated his son’s emigration? Was he simply concerned his son become a well-rounded, independent man? What would Zaman say to his father now? The listener is left with these questions.

When other practitioners began to share their rough cuts during the final months of the workshop it became clear that, unlike the other stories, Zaman’s story did not explicitly narrate circumstances of workplace discrimination, or the circumstances that led to the loss of legal status. Perhaps based on this difference, or perhaps because he remembered the concern raised by the community worker about his story, Zaman approached me during a break and said he needed to change his story. He told me his story did not express the migrant experience and that it needed to be ‘more migrant,’ (field notes, 4 December 2007). I asked Zaman if he liked his story. He did very much. He explained that since moving to Ireland–becoming undocumented, working over fifty hours a week, and feeling intensely isolated–the loss of his father had become more painful. He was living through the hardest
time of his life, and the person who had always counselled him was no longer there for him.

I suggested he ask the group if they thought he needed to change his story, and after the break we discussed Zaman’s concern. Edwina encouraged Zaman to screen his story as is. She said his images were ‘powerful’ and that people needed to see them. Abdel argued that Zaman’s story was definitely a ‘migrant story’ because he had experienced a painful separation from his family and was now living alone in Ireland. (field notes, 4 December 2007).

Figure 21. ‘My father used to tell me, ‘Son, when I’m passed you will feel me a lot.’ Exactly. I feel so much my father. He was right. But it is not possible for my papa to come back to me. Papa, can you hear me? I would like to talk to you just one more time.’ Zaman’s Story, 2007

After the discussion, I spoke again with Zaman. He was still concerned. He had been an active member of an important public policy campaign, and now worried that his story might not be useful in advocating for those changes. He pointed out that there was no ‘proof’ in his story; he didn’t provide the details of the employer deception he had
experienced. I suggested to Zaman that what he doesn’t say in his digital story is as
important as what he does say—it raises questions that will be unique to the experience of
each viewer. For example, the viewer might wonder why Zaman ended up working in a
restaurant, and not in engineering as Zaman had originally planned. Based on this
conversation we developed a post-script to contextualize his story in relation to the corpus
of stories his fellow media practitioners had created. Zaman wrote the following post-script
for the end of his digital story:

> My father passed away in our country of Bangladesh many years ago. Now that I have
> been unable to go home for nearly six years, and my life in Ireland is so hard, I miss
> my father more than ever (Zaman’s Story, 2007).

With this post-script Zaman provides a brief clarification for the viewer, but the body of his
story remains the same. Furthermore, the post-script raises new questions for the viewer,
namely, why has Zaman not been able to go home for nearly six years? The story Zaman
tells is a universal story of loss, and maybe, regret. It is also a story of recognition and love.
Finally, it is a migration story. It is Zaman’s story about coming to terms with what he
thought he would gain professionally through migration, and what he found instead (field
notes, 4 December 2007).

**Premier Screening**

During a workshop coffee break, Edwina suggested to her colleagues that they consider
screening their digital stories at a research launch on irregular migration planned in
conjunction with International Human Rights Day (field notes October 16, 2007). All four
participants agreed to publicly screen their stories. These compositions became *Undocumented
in Ireland: Our Stories* and premiered at the MRCI research launch of *Life in the Shadows: an
Exploration of Irregular Migration in Ireland* on 18 December 2007 (Alexandra, 2008). As part of
their campaign to raise awareness about the circumstances and rights of undocumented
workers, and to forward research-based policy recommendations, the MRCI invited prominent decision-makers, including former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and former President, Mary Robinson, to introduce the initiative, and the documentary essays. This public event formally launched the issue of irregular migration into the policy arena, with research participants and the MRCI eventually winning their campaign for workers’ rights to a ‘bridging visa’ when Minister for Justice Dermot Ahern approved legislation for the temporary visa scheme *(The Irish Times, 29 August 2009; Irish Examiner 15 September 2009; Irish Times 15 September 2009).* Regarding the legislation, Minister Ahern stated, ‘Where migrant workers have not been treated fairly by their employer, and this has been the cause of their undocumented status, it is appropriate that we give them the chance to put things right’ *(Irish Times 15 September 2009).* Responding to the government action, the coordinator of the Bridging Visa Campaign and deputy director of the Migrant Rights Centre, Bill Abom noted, ‘These changes will make a significant difference in the lives of thousands of non-EEA migrant workers who have committed themselves to Ireland, but whose lives have been hanging in the balance’ *(The Irish Times, 29 August 2009).*

**Conclusion**

At the premier screening of the stories, the researcher who had prepared the report on irregular migration in Ireland observed how the digital stories powerfully evoked, in an immediately accessible way, many of the same concerns and experiences expressed by women and men during interviews she conducted throughout the Republic of Ireland (field notes, 18 December 2007). Another researcher noted an important disruption. Although the stories capture an essence of ‘familiar migrant experiences,’ and could therefore be considered ‘generalizable;’ the intimate, heterogeneous character of the first-person
narratives disrupts the very tendency to generalise ‘migrant stories’ (field notes, 21 February 2008).

These observations point to certain strengths of the research method, which I have presented in discussion with elements of critical pedagogy, and revealed through the examples of participants’ scripts and images, and how they were produced, and theorised. On the one hand, Edwina’s final story could be ‘categorised’ as a ‘campaign compatible story’ in that it clearly outlines workplace discrimination, and suggests policy recommendations. However, it speaks directly to migrant workers’ concerns, as interpreted by Edwina, and in ways that are particular to her embodied experiences. Zaman’s story was not initially considered a ‘campaign compatible story’ at all—it was considered by some migrant rights community workers as being ‘too personal’ and not ‘migrant enough.’ Yet, as attention to listening occurred within the workshop site, we observed how research participants like Zaman expressed more nuanced stories of migration, workshop participants supported this narrative diversity, and community workers who observed these interactions came to learn from, and respect the process, and the final product. Importantly, Zaman’s story captures an essence, but does so in ways that cannot easily be categorised. This aspect of the story disrupts what feminist (Pratt 1992), and social justice research scholars (Tuhiwai Smith 2012) argue to be an historical tenet in Western scholarly research—the reproductive role of generalising classifications to colonise, and ‘make other’ the knowledge and experiences of researched subjects. It also responds to over twenty years of critical reflection within the field of anthropology regarding the role of the Western researcher (the lone ethnographer) in relation to ‘his’ subaltern subjects (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Rosaldo 1989; Tedlock 1991; Minh-ha 1989). In this way, the role of the audio-visual as a process does not
aim to distance, or generalise, but rather to reflexively express (Edwards 1997; Pink 2007),
and provide points of departure for dialogue.

Stories

Please view Zaman’s Story, Abdel’s Story and Lyubov’s Story online at:

Chapter 3
Taking the word: Scriptwriting as inquiry

Figure 22. Pierre’s script for his digital story, _An Island Called Ireland_, 2009. In preparation for the voiceover, Pierre added notations in red pen as reminders of pacing and emphasis. Photo credit both images this page: Veronica Vierin.

Figure 23. Adrian’s storyboard for the script from his story 69/851/07 (2009), coupled with his image taken at the Ballyhaunis Direct Provision Centre where he lived at the time of the workshop.
The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own (Bakhtin 1981: 294).

The truthfulness of the asylum seeker’s claim is questioned, and most often disbelieved. As stated in the first chapter, according to Eurostat statistics, Ireland, with a 1.3% acceptance rate of claims for refugee status, has the lowest acceptance rate in the European Union. In the research with asylum seekers and refugees, only two participants had received refugee status at the time of the workshop. That is to say, the asylum claims of only two participants had been formally sanctioned by the state as meriting refugee status. When the veracity of one participant’s story–Rebecca, the only Nigerian woman in the workshop who had received refugee status–was questioned during a workshop session, it brought the issue of truthfulness, and the weight of disbelief to the surface.

During this workshop we had been discussing the possibility of holding a ‘story circle’ (field notes 29 September 2009). Rebecca offered to go first, and tell a story she hoped to develop into her documentary essay. Her story, she told the group, was about ‘crossing the desert without food or water, hungry and thirsty, risking life at sea, suffering and crying, and coming at last to Ireland.’

Ogo immediately questioned the veracity of her story, wondering if it had ‘really’ happened to her. Rebecca hesitated, and responded that it hadn’t happened to her directly, but that it happens to many people. Ogo insisted that the story needed to be about the storyteller, and something he or she experienced. Susan agreed with Ogo—it needed to be

something known from experience. If not, people would wonder if it ‘really’ happened. I confirmed their assertion regarding the storytelling research guidelines—the audio-visual story did need to be self-narrated, and based on something the storyteller had personally experienced, or witnessed first-hand.

Conscious of the end result, Ogo nodded to Susan, and raised the question of audience. ‘People will see these stories,’ he noted. I reminded the group that this would happen only if participants granted permission for the stories to be publicly screened.

I asked if anyone else wanted to share a story or something they were thinking about developing into a story. Abazu agreed. He told a humorous story about a music tour he organised for his son, whom he described as a successful and well-known musician back home in Nigeria. In his story, Abazu faces logistical nightmares involving difficult club managers and endless red tape, but in the end, he perseveres, and everything works out. Participants shifted in their seats, and for a good while no one said anything. Finally Rebecca said, ‘But what does that have to do with anything?’ Abazu shrugged his shoulders.

I reiterated that each person would have the choice, and final say about whatever story they wanted to tell, and whether or not they wanted to screen that story beyond the workshop setting.

‘But if we tell about our lives in Ireland,’ Omar asserted, ‘they must be positive stories.’ He repeated they must be positive stories, added that it was important to show how grateful they were to be in Ireland, and concluded that they shouldn’t tell ‘the sad stories.’

‘If people were indeed grateful and had a positive story to tell, yes, certainly,’ I interjected. But I suggested that peoples’ stories might be more complicated, and those stories were definitely okay to tell as well. Everyone would have a different perspective, and
the important thing was that they would have the chance to consider which story they wanted to tell, and craft that story to completion. As media practitioners, it might be the first story they create, but hopefully not the last.

Ogo, Mona, Susan, Farrokh, and Adrian nodded their heads in the affirmative. Omar seemed uncomfortable with my idea. I suggested that Omar’s approach—to focus on the positive and demonstrate gratitude—was one important representational strategy that often worked quite well. For example, when people asked me how I liked Dublin (which seemed to happen a lot) some days I honestly didn’t like Dublin very much at all, but I knew it might be best not to say so. The group laughed. I went on to explain that for this research project, it was important not to impose any particular feeling, or any singular way of representing their stories. Everyone would have his or her own perspective, and it would probably be more nuanced than ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ ‘happy,’ or ‘sad.’

I asked if anyone else wanted to share a story idea. No one volunteered. I suggested we not hold a “story circle.” Instead, if they preferred, we would take more time, give people a chance to make images, and consider narratives. When they were ready they could share these images and scripts with the group, or not. This would provide a chance to experiment in and out of the workshop setting, and explore different approaches to their audio-visual compositions. Participants appeared to like this idea. From there, I outlined the workshop method. Every workshop period would focus on different creative writing and image-making activities. In addition, we would screen and discuss selected digital stories, film clips, and photographs from international and local photographers. Participants would also have the chance to talk with documentary photographers about their practice, collaborate with professional filmmakers, and ask questions about their audio-visual stories during editing. Participants would begin to keep a writing journal, and to make their own photographs,
which could be shared with the group, if and when, participants were ready. In this way, workshop inquiry, participants’ ethnographic and creative labour outside the workshop site, and the gradual development of a community of practitioners would serve to support research participants as they authored their stories (field notes 29 September 2009).

**Did that really happen?**

Ogo’s question regarding the veracity of Rebecca’s story provided an opportunity to critically discuss the labour and potential impact of social documentary practice, consider the contours of the methodology, and make adaptations—in this case, the decision to not facilitate a standard story circle. But what would have happened if I had not contradicted Omar’s strategy of focusing on the positive? If I had instead agreed with him that yes, it was indeed best, (and maybe even strategically necessary) to focus solely on the ‘positive’ and ‘happy’ stories? Might the finished stories have had wider viewership among ‘mainstream’ Irish audiences? In my mind, my intervention was necessary both for the research (to learn from research participants about their diverse experiences as newcomers), and for my position as an educator (to facilitate an inquiry process in which participants could engage with those experiences). It served to support the aim of learning from and through the stories participants created, and affirmed the opportunity for participants to tell a range of stories—‘happy,’ ‘sad,’ perhaps entirely ambivalent.

It is difficult to know how participants interpreted my intervention. I cannot stand outside myself and observe the interaction, and this points to a challenge in the project. Ideally, in this kind of co-creative inquiry, there would not be a sole researcher/facilitator/educator, but a team of practitioners with whom to de-brief, analyse and re-imagine workshop interactions, and subsequently discuss and write about the practice, and the materials created in collaboration with participants. I had envisioned developing this
research relationship with the community workers who supported the project, but understandably, they faced serious time constraints that hindered this kind of training and collaboration. There was however, considerable interest. If the project had begun first with a digital storytelling workshop for community workers this might have set a foundation for greater, and more considered NGO involvement. An initial training with NGO directors and community workers would have provided them with some direct familiarity of the method, and insight into the strengths and challenges of participatory media and the site-specific pedagogical approach. Additionally, such training would have offered more explicit opportunities for political listening about the ethics of audio-visual storytelling in relation to public media campaigns, the rights of storytellers, and curatorial and distribution issues.

Finally, the interaction regarding the veracity of Rebecca’s story points to a larger tension. As stated in the beginning of the chapter, there is widespread disbelief about asylum claims. Ogo’s questioning of the truthfulness of Rebecca’s story could be understood as a small-scale reproduction of this disbelief. Alternatively, it could be interpreted as a way in which he enters into dialogue with her by questioning the ‘veracity’ of her story, and defending the boundaries of his own ‘truthful claim.’ As researcher, I never asked, ‘did this really happen to you?’ and felt uncomfortable with Ogo’s question—what I interpreted as disbelief—essentially a man asking a woman, ‘Did this really happen to you?’ I followed Rebecca’s lead, and checked in with her after the workshop. The question gave her pause, but she did not appear troubled by it. She revealed she was telling a metaphorical story. She told it well—it was entertaining. Importantly, in that moment of telling, Rebecca resisted the ‘personal’ story approach. Instead, she presented a kind of ‘Every Asylum Seeker’s Story.’
Ogo, and the majority of the group disagreed with this initiative, and insisted she tell a story that she herself had experienced⁴² (field notes 29 September 2009).

In her article about digital storytelling research with migrant women and girls in Toronto, Chloë Brushwood Rose (2009) discusses the question of disbelief by writing that it is ‘up to the researcher never to ask ‘is it truth, or did you make it up?’ Instead,

…we might understand the digital story not primarily in terms of its accuracy or authenticity in representing experience, but as an intermediate area of experience in which the story we tell can contain both what we know and what we imagine. Put another way, we might understand the digital story as a space in which the storyteller risks their connection to the world by finding and creating useful objects – in this sense, it is up to the researcher never to ask ‘is it the truth, or did you make it up?’ (2009: 219).

This conceptualisation of the digital story as both a useful object, and an intermediate space for the storyteller to contain what he/she knows and imagines is productive, especially when working with people who have been disbelieved, or whose stories have been silenced. The object, and the process are marked with possibilities, limits, silences, uncertainties, clarities, and tensions. Some participants, like Rebecca, found their ways toward the metaphorical as they considered what they could, and could not reveal. Instead of asking, ‘Is it truth?’ we might ask instead, in what ways is it true? What does this story mean to the storyteller and the viewer? What does this story do? As Schaffer and Smith argue, the ‘truth’ of a story cannot be read as ‘solely or simply factual. There are different registers of truth beyond the factual: psychological, experiential, historical, cultural, communal, and potentially transformative. The present of personal narrating becomes a fulcrum, that point where the

⁴² In the end, Rebecca told a first-person narrative, but it was also an ‘Every Asylum Seeker’ story from the perspective of women of Nigerian origin living the ‘Aduro Life’ in the Direct Provision system. As discussed in the final chapter, one of the collaborating NGOs expressed concern about this story. Although the organisation eventually concluded that the story was ‘fine’ and ‘important to tell,’ Rebecca decided not to publicly release the story beyond the premiere launch at the Irish Film Institute and the screening at the Guth Gafa documentary film festival. At the time, Rebecca expressed her need to re-position herself in Ireland. She had received refugee status, no longer identified as an asylum seeker, and wanted to focus on re-building her career in an increasingly tough economy.
pressure of memories of a traumatic past and the hopes for an enabling future are held in balance. As balancing acts, directed back to a past that must be shared and toward a future that must be built collectively, acts of personal narrating can become projects of community building, organizational tools, and calls to action’ (Schaffer & Smith 2004: 7-8).

In the case of producing Rebecca’s story, it facilitated dialogue and debate surrounding lived experiences and how they ‘should,’ and ‘should not’ be represented. Additionally, the ensuing production process, and surrounding dialogue, provided opportunities for me, as a researcher, to learn about participants and the everyday circumstances they faced as asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland. Finally, developing a script (and images, as discussed in the following chapter), over an extended period of time, created pathways to knowledge for research participants, in that it provided opportunities to consciously consider their circumstances, and creatively render those experiences audible and visible.

**Script development, editing and implicated practice**

Paul Stoller (1997) conceptualises ethnographic scholarship as ‘implicated practice’—‘embroiled,’ ‘compromised,’ and ‘entangled’ (1997: 32). He points to the scholarship of Christine Bergé as an example. Bergé, he writes, does not 'limit her analysis of implication to a logical relationship; rather she sees the social interactional definition of implication as central to the scholarly enterprise. All human beings, even the most “objective” and “scientific” anthropologist, she says, are perforce implicated in a network of relationships”’ (Ibid). Central aspects of this implication involve the role of listening, and the ways in which we engage with research participants as they explore and consider their lives through audio-visual storytelling. Valuing the story that each participant selected, providing critical feedback in an affirmative manner, and encouraging each storyteller's practice as author and
documentarian, was essential to building trust. Script development and editing are activities that can make this practice tangible and visible. However, some digital storytelling facilitators fail to recognize the mediated aspect of digital storytelling and argue that their role in script development, and editing is one of ‘hands off’ mentoring in which they ‘leave no fingerprints.’ I argue that it is impossible not to leave fingerprints, and that to believe otherwise is to ignore our power and influence as educators. I found that writing about interactions and discussions surrounding script development and editing provided concrete in-roads for reflexively thinking about my involvement and implication in research participants’ stories, and their implication in my life. The practice of developing a script within this community of practice was dynamic, uncertain, and at times, challenging and emotionally complex. As an example of an implicated practice, in the following sections I present the scriptwriting process through the unfolding development of two different stories – *New Ways* by Farrokh, and *Crossing Over* by Evelyn.

**New Ways**

Participants often struggled to develop their written script. In these instances, we sat together working through ideas, and brainstorming. I would listen, ask questions, underline diverse moments, themes, and feelings in their stories, and write down, word for word, their narrative flow. Based on these conversations and written notes, participants shaped their scripts—sharing rough drafts with their colleagues when they were ready. Gubrium, Hill & Flicker (2013) point to a lack of literature that documents such interactions between facilitator and participant in the development of digital stories. In response, the following section presents field note entries from the workshop site to reveal the script development of the audio-visual story, *New Ways*. The writing situates the reader at the workshop, is arranged in chronological order, and documents the development of one script.
September 29, 2008

Farrokh arrived early before workshop today. He doesn’t know what story to tell. I assured him he would have time to figure it out, and that he’ll find the story he wants to tell. I asked if any of the writing activities had given him ideas.

‘No, not really.’

‘But you’ve been doing the group writing activities?’

‘Yes, but there’s too much to say like.’

I asked how he learned English. He explained that he had attended courses, but learned most of his English from his ex-girlfriend. He told me that when his application for asylum was refused he learned his girlfriend ‘did not value him without refugee status.’ He felt ‘inferior.’ The relationship became ‘impossible.’ Eventually they broke up.

I asked if I could write down his words, explaining that this might give him some leads, and help him to determine what story he wanted to tell. Farrokh agreed, and I wrote down his complete sentences and fragments of ideas.

He talked about his struggles to deal with other people’s assumptions about him, and where he comes from.

‘When they learn where I’m from, they assume they know what I think. Who I am.’ He is ashamed of his country’s politics. He doesn’t agree with them, yet people assume he does. I tell him I understand how that can feel.

He grew up Muslim and now identifies as a Christian.

‘Which God do I pray to now?’

I stop what I am doing— and listen. He talks about the Birchwood House, the Direct Provision Centre where he lives. He shares one room with four other men. Four unrelated people living in one room. He has limited to no control over all aspects of his living quarters.
He can’t adjust the thermostat. It’s controlled from outside the room. He can’t turn off the lights when he wants to sleep. Like in prison.

I ask if he has friends outside the hostel, if he is able to get out at all. He knows some people from church. To keep busy, he volunteers at the hostel repairing washing machines. In Iran he studied mechanical engineering. Ever since arriving in Ireland he’s been volunteering. It’s been three years now. He hates the Hostel Manager. I note the intensity of his anger. Farrokh is a gentle person, extremely polite and considerate with the others in the workshop; the situation with the manager must be terribly stressful.

Mona, Susan and the others begin arriving, and we shift gear. I hand Farrokh the notes. He looks at his sentences in quotation marks, and sets the paper into his folder.

October 27, 2008

Farrokh hasn’t shared a script with the group yet, but often stays on after the workshop is over, writing intensively in Farsi, and editing image after image in Photoshop.

Last week he came to the workshop with his arm in a sling. Everyone noticed, but when Mona asked him what happened, Farrokh shook his head, smiled, and said nothing. No one insisted. Even during lunch, a more informal time when people often talk and catch up, Farrokh said nothing. Throughout the day he looked withdrawn, but he listened closely to other people’s scripts, he asked questions about their photographs, and participated in discussion.

November 4, 2008

Tonight, Jimmy knocks on the door like every week—reminding us it’s time to leave the building; they’re locking up for the night. We know he’ll give us an extra ten minutes.

Just as I begin turning off computers, Farrokh tells me.
‘I punched a wall.’

‘You punched the wall,’ I tentatively answer back.

‘Yeah…I worry about myself.’

Farrokh alludes to wanting to jump out a window. I listen fast. I hold still. I am conscious of my breathing.

‘How did I get here?’ he tells me.

It is not a question. It is something else of which I am uncertain. It is the third time in two weeks I have heard people in this research project say those words out loud—how did I get here?

We walk downstairs to the media centre where I photocopy the notes I’ve taken from his ideas and our conversation. The director of the centre asks Farrokh what happened to his arm.

‘I don’t want to lie, but I feel ashamed to tell the truth,’ Farrokh answers.

‘In that case,’ the director replies, ‘just say: “It’s a long story: I’ll tell you some other time.”’

I look at Farrokh. I wonder what he will decide to say now. I wonder what story he will choose. As we walk out the front entrance of the building I ask if there is a counsellor at the centre he can speak to. Or a friend, someone he trusts.

‘Not really.’

We talk. He’s visibly upset. I tell him not to internalise something that is outside of his control, not to blame himself for a system that is clearly failing him, and many others who have done nothing wrong. I say I’m worried. I know he has endured a great deal. I know he is capable of taking care of himself, and I’m also worried. I want to hug Farrokh—to hug someone in pain, someone who I have come to know and respect, seems the ‘right’
response. But I stop myself. Farrokh is formal, and this relationship of ‘student’ and ‘teacher,’ ‘researcher,’ and ‘research participant’ is also formal. Yet, these roles do not convey the care and kindness that has developed between all of us in the workshop. Of course, I am not Farrokh’s friend in the traditional sense of the word, but I have come to know him, and I do not know what to do. I feel responsible, and implicated in this practice. We stand outside the building in silence for a while. The sound of gulls. The smell of malt from the Guinness factory. A group of adolescents has gathered on the corner talking loudly, and laughing. I say I look forward to seeing him in the workshop next week. He says he will be there. I tell him to call if he needs to talk. We shake hands. He walks north toward the bus station, and I walk south toward my apartment.

**November 11, 2008**

Mid-way through the workshop tonight Farrokh finished his script, and told me he wanted to share it with the group. Reading the final script before workshop participants often provided moments of dialogue, solidarity and recognition. This was the case with Farrokh. When he read his script people listened closely. I imagine they were curious about this intense, quiet man. He was one of two participants—among nine—who did not have children, and no direct family members in Ireland. He was one of two participants who did not come from an African country. Although he discussed images and ideas, he talked little about himself. Why exactly was his arm in a cast?

When he read the following description of the living conditions at his hostel, the emotions in the room shifted.

At night when I want to sleep someone is watching television, someone else is snoring loudly and someone else is smoking.
Mona, Marie and Abazu laughed out loud in recognition. Other participants nodded their heads knowingly.

‘That's it! That's what we live with! That is it. That is it,’ Ogo asserted, nodding his head in affirmation. The others nodded their heads in agreement. Farrokh observed his colleagues’ appraisal of his script. He seemed pleased. Following is the script that Farrokh read to the group, and later developed into his digital story:

*New Ways* by Farrokh

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.

In Tehran I worked as an engineer. I had a good position in a factory as a tool and mold maker. I belonged to a happy, loving family. I was very patient, a healthy person, always optimistic about the future!

But life became difficult, it was unsafe for me and I had to leave Iran.

Man be in dar na pay heshmato jah amadeham.
(I have not come here seeking prestige or recognition).

Az pase hadesheh inja be panah amadeham.
(Rather, I have come in search of shelter).

Three years ago I came to Ireland seeking asylum. I was placed in the Birchwood House hostel in Waterford City. I live there with about 160 other people. We are not allowed to work, not allowed to study. We are given meals and 19 Euros 10 cent a week.

After a few months I met a lovely girl. We understood each other well; we had a lot in common. I fell in love with her. We planned to get married.

To get married she said I had to get refugee status. When my application for asylum was refused, I realized she did not value me without refugee status. I felt inferior. It was a very painful period and the continuation of the relationship was unbearable. Finally, we broke up. This had a terrible impact on my already miserable situation.

At the Birchwood House I have to share a room with 4 other men. At night when I want to sleep someone is watching television, someone else is snoring loudly and someone else is smoking. Sometimes the temperature is too hot and sometimes it’s too cold. It’s impossible to sleep soundly.
I have no one who understands my own language to talk to. I find it really hard to express myself in English. No one is willing to listen.

That night I couldn’t sleep. The lights were out. But the guy next door had been talking loudly all night. Suddenly we heard water overflowing from the sink. It smelled terrible. It spilled all over our room, destroying all my books, photographs and documents. I went to ask for help from the Centre’s reception, but nobody would help us. Burning with frustration and out of control, I punched the wall and broke my hand.

For a while I looked after my hand and it healed. Now, I need to look after my heart and my life. As an asylum seeker I know my situation won’t change quickly. It is difficult, but I have to keep going. As I let go of the old way, a new way is shown to me.
Figure 24. External view of an ‘accommodation centre.’ Screen shot from New Ways (2009) written and directed by Farrokh. The image is animated with a slow pan, and lights that turn on and off as Farrokh narrates the following moment: ‘Three years ago I came to Ireland seeking asylum. I was placed in the Birchwood House hostel in Waterford City. I live there with about 160 other people. We are not allowed to work, not allowed to study. I have to share a room with 4 other men. At night when I want to sleep someone is watching television, someone else is snoring loudly and someone else is smoking. Sometimes the temperature is too hot and sometimes it’s too cold. It is impossible to sleep soundly.’

As the field notes document, script development sought to follow the lead of the storyteller, and was supported by on-going, one-on-one discussions between the storyteller and myself, and between the storyteller and a community of practitioners. Similar to the first workshop, each participant chose a different way to approach his/her story and script, but unlike the Undocumented in Ireland: Our Stories workshop, we did not hold a standard ‘story circle.’ Farrokh’s sense that there was ‘too much to say’ points to the challenge of conceptualising, and editing a very short autobiographical story. Where to focus? What to say? What to omit? Over time, across dialogical engagement, and personal reflection Farrokh developed his final script, New Ways. The field notes also reveal the affective labour of the research, and the helplessness I at times felt in relation to the challenges research participants were facing.
In developing their scripts, some participants wrote from the asylum centres, and sent in successive drafts via email, while others wrote exclusively during the workshop sessions. When participants had a draft ready to share, they would read the script out loud, we would discuss different moments in the story, make observations, ask clarifying questions, and suggest possible edits. Some participants welcomed suggestions about possible changes to their scripts, and others were clear about not wanting to make any revisions. I respected this clarity—offering suggestions when they were requested, and within an ethos of supporting the agency of the storyteller. Once participants had the sense that their script was ready to share with the group, they chose when to present it. By that time, practitioners had had the chance to work alone with their images and ideas, collaborate in the workshop setting, and examine issues of audio-visual representation through workshop discussions. To demonstrate a different, yet equally collaborative editing process, I now turn to another practitioner, Evelyn.

**Crossing Over**

Evelyn is from the Ibibio Clan of Akwa Ibom, Nigeria, and came to Ireland in 2005 seeking asylum. In Nigeria, Evelyn worked as a community journalist. Before participating in the workshop she was involved with a university-based immigrant women writers’ group in Dublin. She had read her prose publicly, and identified as a writer, but noted that in the workshop she began to consider herself a poet for the first time. She is the mother of three sons aged twelve, nine, and four (at the time of the workshop in 2009). At her accommodation hostel, Evelyn provided counsel to her fellow residents as an active member of the residents’ committee. Every week she travelled several hours by train from County Mayo to Dublin to attend the workshop at the college. In the workshop, Evelyn was well liked for her no-nonsense, direct style of communication and her quick sense of humour.
She rarely wrote during the workshop sessions, choosing instead to edit images, participate in workshop discussions, and mentor her colleagues. The following is Evelyn’s final script, which she recorded and developed into her digital story:

_Crossing Over_ by Evelyn

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. Going to the GP is out of the question. I have seen him five times in one month. I know this is the pulse of frustration—whose height cannot be measured, nor bounds determined by a mere stethoscope.

This is my third year in the direct provision hostel and I have learned that asylum seekers visit the GP four times more frequently than normal Irish people. The pressure in here is so high that everybody seems to be furious over little things. If you ask me, I would say that most of our ailments are stress-related.

I look up; it’s Funmi. Not again. It is her 5th year in the hostel so she’s a ‘bag of trouble.’ Being a member of the residents’ committee, I am confronted with all kinds of situations. Most times, I get so furious about whom to direct my anger at. Is it the asylum system that piles up people together for years of idleness? Or, our greedy country leaders who send their youth scrambling for safety?

Despite my headache, I counsel Funmi. Just then, Carolyn bursts into my room, raging, swearing and cursing.

“What again?” I ask.

“Do you know that my solicitor said my case would be great if I wasn’t a Nigerian?”

I stare at her, wondering how my country got to be a ‘sinful nation’ in the eyes of the world.

“Funmi! Funmi! Funmi!”

I can hear the lady in room 10 calling out,

“You have a registered post!”

There is a drop-pin silence.

This is one moment that every asylum seekers dreads, it is the decider–either you are in, or you are out.

We all cluster around Funmi. Her heartbeat vibrating like a Nokia phone. After five stressful years Funmi received her leave to remain. What a situation! Five years of being on the waiting line, and one minute of crossing over.

In comparison, here is Evelyn’s original draft, which she sent via email:
I woke up this Tuesday morning with a bit of ‘hot head’ and shivers even though the room was heated. It was one of those rare days in Ireland when the skies emptied her ‘bowels of icy grains’. Going to the GP was out of the question as I had seen him five times in one month. I knew it was the authentic pulse of frustration whose height could not be measured nor the bounds dictated by a mere stethoscope.

This is my third year in the direct provision hostel and I know that asylum seekers visit the GP four times higher than the normal Irish people. I also know that the pressure in here is so high that anger has become an attitude. Everybody seems to be furious over nothing and if you ask me I would say most of our ailments are stress-related.

One knock on my door and I looked up, it was Funmi, not again, I grumbled. She was a ‘bag of trouble’. It was her 5th year in the hostel so she was ‘news’, I suspected she came to gossip about the weekend’s incident and possibly her escape from being transferred. She went too far this time, attempting to strangle the manager was more than a bold step.

This was a regular occurrence in the direct provision hostels; the behavioural script was the same. Fights, threats, stabbings and all sorts.

On a lighter mood, Funmi is supposed to wear a tag with the word ‘modern madness, emergencies only’. Not only her, maybe all asylum seekers.

Being a member of the resident’s committee, you are confronted with all kinds of situation and keeping peace sometimes turns out sour. Most times, I get so furious as to whom to direct my anger at. Is it the system that piles up people together for years in idleness? Or our greedy country leaders who send their youths scrambling for safety. If only our leaders knew how entangled we are in the web of conflict between physical safety and emotional trauma, they might learn to do things right.

What issues should one even address in the direct provision? Is it the violent storms and hurricanes of rearing children in one room? Or the boredom of our life timetable which has been restricted to food, television and sleep?

Despite my discomfort, I had to face the issue of counselling Funmi, just then Carolyn bursts into my room, she was raging, ‘swearing’ and ‘cursing’. What again? I asked, do you know that, my solicitor said, my case would have been great, if I wasn’t a Nigerian.

Frankly speaking, I would have stared at her for ages, deep in thoughts, wondering how my country turned out to be a ‘sinful nation’ in the eyes of the world.

Funmi, Funmi, Funmi, I could hear the lady in room 10 calling out, you have a registered post. There was a ‘drop-pin’ silence. I could have jumped out of my skin with fright, this is one moment that every asylum seeker dreads, it was the decider, either you are in or you are out of Ireland.

We all came out to sympathise with her, you could hear Funmi’s heartbeat vibrating like a Nokia phone, but this time it was a bang. Funmi had been given leave to remain in Ireland.
after five stressful years. What a situation! Five years of being an illegal immigrant and one minute of being legalized.

Evelyn’s draft provides ethnographic information about the asylum system, and her experiences of living in direct provision. She raises a series of questions about how to strategically understand the circumstances of asylum seekers, and the asylum system in general. She questions where responsibility lies. Who is to blame? The asylum system that ‘piles up people together for years of idleness,’ or ‘greedy country leaders who send their youths scrambling for safety?’ She asks which problems, among so many, should be addressed—the boredom arising from social and economic exclusion? The ‘violent storms and hurricanes of raising children in one room?’ The enforced exclusion, marginalisation and poverty of the direct provision system, and its daily and potentially long-term health impacts on the men, women and children who seek protection? Or, the on-going stress of living with the threat of transfer from one hostel to another, and the often unspoken fear of deportation? Evelyn also raises concern about the stigmatisation of being Nigerian, and how that fact alone can block the pathway to legal status.

Evelyn’s final script is significantly shorter than the first draft. It takes the reader into her asylum hostel and focuses in on one day of life. More precisely, it is the story of one moment—the moment of receiving leave to remain, or as Evelyn cinematically and metaphorically says in her story, the moment of ‘crossing over.’ The shorter version of the script highlights Evelyn’s unique writing style and the cadence of her spoken word. It is impossible for me to read this script and not hear Evelyn’s voice. Throughout the piece, the listener learns about the psychological impact of a failed system and how, despite the inhumanity of their circumstances, despite Evelyn’s headache in the story, she provides counsel. The changes between the first version and the final script that became Crossing Over
occurred over several drafts, co-editing sessions, and consideration in relation to the feedback Evelyn received from her community of practice. They are both useful documents—one has greater detail and information, while the other provides a core element for Evelyn’s final documentary essay.

![Figure 25. Screen shot from Crossing Over, (2009) written and directed by Evelyn. ‘The pressure in here is so high that everyone seems to be furious about little things. If you ask me I would say that most of our ailments are stress related.’](image)

**Too much to say**

Both Farrokh and Evelyn developed scripts about the mental health impacts of life in direct provision. Farrokh outlines the critical incidents that landed him in the hospital, while Evelyn writes about her headache as ‘the pulse of frustration—whose height cannot be measured, nor bounds determined by a mere stethoscope.’ Evelyn wrote the script while living in a one-room apartment with her three sons—her fourth year in direct provision while Farrokh wrote his script during the workshop, and over a period of seven weeks. Evelyn’s story ends on a hopeful note—the possibility of receiving leave to remain, the chance to
'cross over.' The ending of Farrokh’s story is also hopeful—‘a new way will be shown’ to him. However, his conclusion comes so quickly it leaves the reader wondering. How exactly will this ‘new way’ appear? What does it mean to ‘let go of old ways?’ How might that impact Farrokh? Speaking with Farrokh about his ending, he explained that it was an ending to hope toward, as he told me, the happy ending he wanted to create for himself (field notes 28 May 2009).

Nearly a year after Farrokh requested an accommodation transfer; he was moved to a hostel in Limerick—a former hotel in what he determined to be a violent neighbourhood. Shortly after the transfer, there was a stabbing in the hostel, and Farrokh was transferred from shared accommodation to the newly vacant room. Finally, after so much waiting, asylum accommodation responded to his request to live alone, but the circumstances of his transfer were traumatic, and Farrokh did not feel at ease. Farrokh tried to keep his spirits up. He volunteered for odd jobs through his Iranian social networks, and occasionally travelled to Dublin for different church activities. In 2011, exhausted by the uncertainty of waiting for a response to his claim, he decided to leave Ireland. Currently, he lives in London where he is studying English, apprenticing through a job-training program, and volunteering with his church. He writes that life in London can be hard, and there are certain things he misses about Ireland, but he hopes the UK will offer greater opportunities (email correspondence).

On 15 December 2010 Evelyn and her three sons were among a group of thirty-five people taken into custody, and deported on a late-night Frontex flight. Approaching

Athens, the airplane encountered mechanical failure, and was forced to return to Dublin
(Irish Times 17 December 2010). The next day, Evelyn and her family were back in Dublin.
Evelyn’s friends in Ireland called the technical mishap the ‘Christmas Miracle.’ I was in
contact with Evelyn during this period, but no longer living in Ireland, which made it
difficult to discuss sensitive issues. On February 2, 2012, I spoke with Evelyn. She was not
interested in talking about her legal situation, or the traumatic deportation. Instead, the
discussion focused on the script writing and editing processes. The interview reveals how
Evelyn conceptualised the representational process of creating her documentary, Crossing
Over.

D: Can you tell me about the process of editing your script? In relation to your piece,
Crossing Over? How was the editing process for you?

E: When you said, ‘You should start the story,’ it was like (I) had too much in my head,
too much information. How to select from all that? And come up with something
that would be only three minutes? That was the most difficult aspect of it. I had
about four pages written down so I had to know what was the most important, or
what would encompass everything that I had written. That was the most difficult
part for me. I was wishing that we had to write pages. Even when I listen to the
documentary I keep asking myself, am I sure that was the best I could do? Am I sure
that I was able to tell everybody’s story into that 3-minute documentary? For a writer
you can never be (...) even when I’m writing, if I write a one page story, if I look at
it ten times, I will see how I can change it in ten ways. You keep editing, you keep
thinking. I wanted to fit everybody’s story into that perspective.

D: How did you see my role in relation to your story? How did you see the way that I
edited with you?

E: What you did, we could see your role as providing a platform. You gave us a
platform to tell our stories. It’s like you have this story all this while and you don’t
ever believe that somebody would want to listen to it. So you gave us that platform you know to tell it, the freedom of expression to tell it as it is. So we got that platform and you made us know the things we didn’t know we could do— you know, the whole process of editing the draft. A few people had that skill of writing, but a lot of people in that group didn’t have it. They didn’t even know they could be storytellers. You know, you brought that out in us.

D: When I asked you questions about your script, about the meaning of certain words, and if you would consider other words, and other options—the details of the editing process, how did that feel for you?

E: It was a process that we led as well because there are some words that, you know, it is different (…) let me say (…) we come from different countries. What one thing means for me, here in Europe it means something else, a different word, or it gives a different meaning and those were things that you led us through because there were words where you asked, ‘What’s the meaning of this?’ or ‘What do you really mean to say here?’ It takes somebody with psychology to really know how to ask in depth what we really mean. And from that meaning you now know what we feel as people, as individuals, and all that. The words are very, very important because they convey how you feel. The whole process of editing gave us that opportunity.

D: What do you think of Crossing Over now?

E: It’s something that is a masterpiece there for me. It’s your work, it’s your feelings; it is something you hope will impact on somebody. That somebody somewhere will listen to it, and maybe even if the person doesn’t do something about it he will know that somebody, somewhere sometime went through this. It’s your story being told by you. It’s not somebody else because we have had this experience of somebody else telling your story for you—oh, this is what they feel in that asylum centre, this is what is happening there. No, now you’re telling the story yourself.

D: What’s the difference?

E: The difference is you’re telling the story yourself— you’re giving it raw, the way it is. If somebody’s telling the story for you, it’s like that person is trying, but he can never
get it the right way, he can never have that experience. You are telling the experience, everything you can think of, the way it is, not somebody feeling that you might have felt this way, or that way, at that point in time. This way is the way you feel it, and the way it is for you.

D: What do you take away from the experience now?

E: For me it's a stepping stone that in the future could put things down, that is what I hope for because it’s a kind of reflection. Maybe in the future things are going to change for individuals, for the country, for everybody, but it's a stepping stone that could document things that happened and people will look back at it, to what Ireland was, or what individuals went through. Positively, it’s a kind of strength. I know that I have a story somewhere.

D: How could the stories be archived? Where should they be screened now?

E: I don’t know how Ireland will evolve, but I know that it is one piece that is very close to my heart. Who knows where that story might be relevant?

D: A short synopsis about you? What would you say about yourself?

E: I would say this is one individual that the situation in Ireland, the situation I find myself in, has made me a better writer because yes, I never knew I was a poet. So, some bad situations turn out positively. There is a book, and in the synopsis my name is mentioned besides (a prominent Irish politician), you can imagine! It says, ‘Evelyn Jones’ is an African Irish writer.’ If I can now be qualified as an African Irish writer then I should look forward to being one.

Despite her legal status in relation to the state, Evelyn developed a societal status as a writer. Her writing has been published, her documentary essay, Crossing Over, has been screened throughout Europe and the Americas, and is available for viewing online. She has contributed to public discourse in Ireland and become an active ‘cultural citizen’ (Rosaldo 1994) without having been granted the rights and entitlements of citizenship. She looks
forward to being an ‘African Irish writer,’ even as her ability to remain in Ireland is unclear. In this way, like Farrokh, Evelyn is writing into an uncertain future.

**Conclusion**

Attending to the network of relationships, and the interactions surrounding script development and editing made the ‘implicated’ practice of co-creative documentary production visible and tangible. The intensively multi-mediated endeavour of social documentary labour requires critical attention to listening and flexibility as the researcher responds to and interacts with the concerns, interests and needs of a community of practice. Facilitating the workshop without the standard story circle provided research participants with more entry points for developing their scripts, as well as possibilities for directing and shaping the overall process. Through this method of engagement, the script writing became a form of inquiry into research participants’ lived experiences. Practitioners had time to consider what they would reveal, and enter into dialogue with one another from the foundation point of their scripts. As Evelyn and Farrokh both noted, the framework of a 3-5-minute documentary essay proved challenging. However, this restriction also provided a useful container for practitioners to consider what they know and what they might imagine. As Evelyn noted, the scripting and editing process served as a form of ‘reflection’—a way to ‘know what was most important’—a telling of ‘your story the way it is for you.’ As a researcher, the script editing served as a vehicle for learning from and about research subjects, and the particular circumstances they faced. For other members of the group, it provided opportunities for dialogue, solidarity and recognition. Finally, the development of a longitudinal space for creativity, and in particular, the act of script writing facilitated relationships of caring and trust.
Stories

Please view the stories discussed in this chapter—New Ways by Farrokh, and Crossing Over by Evelyn—available online at: http://www.darcyalexandra.com/practice/living-in-direct-provision-9-stories/
Chapter 4
Visualising Voice: Participatory visual ethnography

Figure 26. Adrian presents his script and images with the other research participants, and begins storyboarding his digital story, 69/851/07.

This chapter aims to reveal the meditational role of, and reflexive relationship to, photographs. Instead of understanding images as tools for eliciting information, or data and evidence of ‘what really happened,’ images are conceptualised as meditational objects (Edwards 1997; Edwards & Hart 2004) that facilitate experimental and poetic engagements with experience. By facilitating this process, and observing how participants audio-visually represented, and made meaning of their experiences as newcomers to Ireland, the research explores how the visual served as a medium for inquiry (MacDougall 2006: 224).

Following the work of Douglas Harper (1987, 2003), images in this chapter are presented as elements of a ‘visual ethnographic narrative,’ providing a chronicle of ethno-dialogue (Rouch in Feld 2003) facilitated through photography. This phenomenological mode of representation between image and text is designed to ‘create the experience of
process, to evoke a feeling of tone and texture,’ and to evidence the inter-connected and subjective labour between research participants and ethnographer (Harper 1987a: 4).

Human beings have long employed images to give shape to, and make meaning of the world. Through imagery, we have defined concepts of ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ ‘strange’ and ‘familiar,’ and these representations, in turn, have served to conceptualise the world in which we live (Collier & Collier 1986: 8). Photography, in particular, attests to, as MacDougall observes, ‘the possibilities within us’ (2006: 148). He writes, ‘Photographs, like mirrors, double us and create a parallel world, what Susan Sontag called “a reality in a second degree.” They represent us, and they also serve to re-identify us’ (2006: 148). Elizabeth Edwards discusses this expressive and metaphorical power of photography when she writes,

Photography can communicate about culture, people’s lives, experiences and beliefs, not at the level of surface description but as visual metaphor which bridges that space between the visible and the invisible, which communicates not through the realist paradigm but through a lyrical expressiveness. As a consequence, as Kraucauer has argued (1960: 22), the expressive (aesthetic) value of photographs ‘would seem to be a measure of their explorative powers’ (Edwards 1997: 58).

The explorative powers of photography in the practice of making images are of particular interest in this chapter. Some participants developed their approach to photography through a realist paradigm—forensically documenting their ‘case,’ and seeking visual evidence. Other practitioners, as discussed through the example of Edwina’s story in Chapter 2, moved beyond the evidential and explored their stories through a more lyrical expressiveness. 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 colour is the idea/feeling/moment? What does it sound like? Taste like? Where can the image be found? Which objects, and places evidence or evoke that moment/feeling/idea? These questions helped participants develop a sensorial space for stories and within that space images could
be formed. Practitioners considered how to visually evoke different themes in their stories—the challenges of ‘integration’; the courage to leave home and family; the comfort of nostalgia and memories from home; feelings of isolation, loss and grief; expectations, longings, and hopes for new beginnings; race-based discrimination and violence; the uncertainty and boredom of living in the asylum system; love and longing for separated children and family members left behind; the psychological impact of restrictions against working, studying, or living autonomously; and the fear and sense of helplessness of living without legal documentation. Through an exploratory process of seeking imagery that could evoke the different aspects of each storyteller’s composition, participants engaged with these themes, and documented their experiences as newcomers to Ireland.

69/851/07

Adrian is a Serbian artist born and raised in Belgrade who fled to Ireland in the spring of 2006. Following is 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.

Written text on screen: My mum passed away nine months ago. Her last words were: ‘Do not come back home for your own safety.’ I couldn’t go to her funeral because of the fear of prosecution.
Because of the constant stress, I had a break down and ended up in the Mental Health Hospital in Castlebar. For the first two weeks I didn’t leave my room. The nurses brought me food, but I couldn’t eat at all. I wasn’t able to talk to anyone yet. I found it difficult even to speak in my own language. I spent six weeks in the hospital where they treated me with severe depression and psychotic episodes. They gave me a psychiatrist who tried desperately to talk with me, but I just couldn’t express my feelings. One day something triggered in me. I suddenly felt comfortable enough to talk. One of the nurses at the hospital told me, “You can go back to Westport and hide there for the rest of your life, but you won’t be able to develop your skills and integrate into this society.” Now I live in Ballyhaunis Hostel where I am waiting for refugee status.

To develop his visual narrative, Adrian 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, Adrian shared these images with fellow practitioners (figure 26). He explained that the card represented the support, care and love he received from friends, and that the butterflies on the card symbolize the soul. In his audio-visual composition, the butterfly imagery references back to the death of his mother. Sharing his documentary images from the accommodation centre Adrian described a ‘200-year-old building that is cold, drafty, mould-infested and leaks constantly’ (field notes November 24, 2008). Adrian made all but two of the images from inside the hostel, in the present tense, and yet these images narrate the past–Adrian’s story of activism in Serbia, his exile to Ireland, the death of his mother, his depression, hospitalization, and recovery. The opening sequence for his documentary essay is based on a photograph of runners smudged with blood (figure 27). Adrian explained that one of the hostel members had been in a car accident, and Adrian took the photo of the man’s runners. In re-positioning the photograph within his audio-visual composition, Adrian explained, “This photograph represents the peaceful protests, the endless walks and the beatings we received” (field notes November 24, 2008).
The single present tense sentence of Adrian’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, Adrian couples this last statement with the image of a surveillance camera (figure 28). 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). Adrian’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.
Figure 28. Surveillance camera. Screen shot from 69/851/07 (2009) written and directed by Adrian. ‘Now I live in Ballyhaunis Hostel where I am waiting for refugee status.’

**At Mosney**

Practitioners living at the asylum centre known as Mosney developed their images collectively (figures 29-43). Through a participatory visual ethnographic practice, Susan, Mona and Marie created images that responded to the themes explored in their scripts. They spotted locations, set up wide shots, establishing shots, close ups, and looked for contextual images that could represent narrative moments and key elements in their essays.

In the following section I take the reader on site to Mosney, and into the participatory ethnographic practice of collaborative image making. I combine ethnographic detail about the collective visual practice at Mosney with a discussion of the images that directors created, the emergent conversations and themes connected to the photographs, and how those images were edited into research participants’ final compositions.

Mosney is located near the sea, approximately one hour north of Dublin. The accommodation centre, which now houses asylum seekers from all over the world, is a
former Butlins holiday camp. The British chain developed vacation housing, and fairground-style family entertainment on the site in 1948. The holiday camp closed in 1980 and was established as an accommodation centre in 2000. Today, the remnants of the past create a garish, out-dated and abandoned feeling to the architectural environment. In contrast, the location is green, wooded and spacious, dauntingly exposed to sea winds during winter months, gentle and warm during those days of summer sun.

The Drogheda bus at Busáras travels northeast from the city centre on the M1 highway. When the bus arrives at Balbriggan I send Susan a text. Mosney junction is an easy spot to miss until you know it. From the junction, it’s another ten-minute walk to the asylum centre. I cross the narrow road to where Susan is waiting. She drives us down the country lane leading toward Mosney, and parks in the lot. The day is crisp, clean blue. Not a cloud in the sky, and very cold. Once again, I notice quite a few people sitting in cars, talking on cell phones, hanging out and waiting. I remember what Mona said about feeling uncomfortable with the new roommate she and her daughter were assigned—a single woman who speaks a language Mona does not understand, and appears to be struggling emotionally. The first night the woman arrived, she spent most of the evening locked in the bathroom. Mona thinks she was crying. I imagine that people placed in the same apartment with complete strangers escape to this parking lot in search of some semblance of privacy. Susan and I walk by them, and pass through the gate with little notice from the guard this time. We walk across the long stretch of houses and trees to where she lives with her husband and four children. The children greet us at the door. A woman I have never met sits in the living room holding baby Adebayo. The day Adebayo was born is the only day Susan missed a workshop. She called from the hospital to share the news—she had given birth to a healthy, baby boy. Susan brings Adebayo to the seminar when she can’t find childcare, and Rebecca,
Evelyn, Mona, Marie and I take turns holding him while Susan works on her story. Today, like most days, Ade is in good form. He’s bundled up and ready to go. Although the apartment is not insulated, Susan’s toddler and the older children visiting the apartment seem oblivious to the drafty, damp cold. This is one adaptation to life on this island I have not mastered. But as Susan notes in her script, her children were born here, this is ‘the only home they have ever known,’ Caged Escape (2009). Adebayo’s siblings, and their friends, take immediate interest in the cameras. I set the Nikon D200 on the table and start by introducing them to the smaller digital camera. Each child takes a turn, and together we practice switching the camera on and off, looking through the lens, selecting a frame, and pressing the button. We review the images. Susan’s daughter Dilinna takes an image of her best friend (figure 29), snaps of sitting room, and pieces of the apartment—all from a child’s eye level.

Figure 29. Dilinna takes a photo of her friend, Ogo. Mosney, 27 November 2008. Photo credit: Dilinna.
As I play with the children, Marie and Mona arrive. Marie brings food and Susan sets the bag in the refrigerator. On other occasions, I have watched Susan prepare a lunch of Nigerian stew with cow legs, spicy red peppers and rice for her husband who ate alone—his meal neatly set on a TV dinner tray in front of the television. Today, her husband seems to be away. He worked as a solicitor in Nigeria, and tries to find volunteer opportunities with law firms in Dublin, but it’s difficult. Not being able to exercise his profession, not being able to work and provide for his family is taking a toll. Susan tells me he is struggling with depression and anxiety. His parents are getting older, and he feels the stress of not being able to materially and emotionally support them. Susan asks the girls to go upstairs and play. They don’t want to leave the excitement. Susan raises her voice slightly, and runs down the consequences of not obeying. The children run upstairs. Susan laughs, and makes a comment about how child rearing is different in Nigeria. I reply that parenting is hard, and I’m no one to judge; besides, it’s clear how much she loves her children. Now the women sit down and drink tea, eat biscuits, and talk. I’m aware of being new to West African English, and not easily understanding conversations that don’t immediately involve me as an interlocutor. After a while, Susan decides it’s time to begin our ‘tour’ of Mosney. First, we discuss the following list of places and objects they have identified for consideration in their stories:

**Sitting rooms, windows, and doors**

Images that can represent the themes of new beginnings, expectations, nostalgia, loneliness, boredom, isolation, and the seemingly endless waiting of living in the direct provision system.
Walls and gates

Images that can symbolize the barriers asylum seekers face, the isolation of the detention centres, being ‘shut out,’ not allowed to work, or study, a complicated and arbitrary system, and the challenges to integration.

Baby carriage, and playground

Images to symbolize children, and the uncertainty of their futures. Marie said an empty playground could represent the loneliness of living in Ireland without her son. Susan suggested the images could also speak to the unforeseen consequences the asylum system might have on their children, and future generations.

Empty chairs, and empty dining room table

To evidence the absence of children who are living with extended family members ‘back home,’ the everyday reality of family separation for siblings and parents, and the longing to be reunited. For example, in her story, Ray, Marie writes,

It was very painful leaving without you, not knowing if you were safe. Suddenly you were not there. They promised you would join me in two weeks. Two weeks that has turned to years.

I hear you go around the house calling out for your brother and sister to come out of hiding. How do I explain that I have not abandoned you? How do I make up for these lost years?

Your sister saves you a seat on the bus and at the dinner table. Your brother and sister miss you so much, Ray.

While in her story, I have people I left back home, Mona writes,

I left my family four years ago. I don’t like to remember the day I left home or the way I left. It is too painful. What I do remember every day are my kids. I miss my kids a lot…It’s been a long time. I miss their birthday parties. My second son, Kenneth, always reminds me of his birthday. He hopes I will come home and celebrate his birthday with him. Dreams that never come true.
A telephone

To represent the challenges of communication across distance; feelings of happiness to reconnect over the phone or computer, but also feelings of loss and guilt; longing to live together again and, the tenuous hope for family reunification. Sometimes the challenges to communication are economic and infrastructural, as in the case of Mona. In her story she explains that her mother charges the cell phone with a car battery, and cannot always find a way to keep the phone charged, making it difficult for Mona to communicate with her three children living in rural Liberia. Other times, the challenges are affective. For example, the challenge of not having answers to their children’s questions regarding family reunification.

This concern arises in the stories of both Marie and Mona. In her story Ray, Marie writes,

Mummy, please can I come to your house? These are your words, Ray, when I speak to you. I don’t know when my boy. I know you think your mama has abandoned you. I want you to now that I have not and that I have you in my mind all the time.

Your sister … asks me when we will be a family again. I don’t have any answer to her question.

Similarly, in I have people I left back home, Mona writes,

When I call home, my first son Frank, asks me, “Mommy what are you doing to bring us over to you?” I have no answer to this question.

Susan is not separated from any of her children, but she faces other questions regarding their legal status and their future as a family. In Caged Escape Susan wonders,

How will it all end? My children are quite small. I wonder what answer I can give them at this stage, when I myself do not know. They do not know any other home apart from the one here. They look at me with questions in their eyes searching for direction, answers, and hope.

The communal dining hall at Mosney

To evidence the ways in which people’s daily lives are regimented and institutionalised. As Susan writes in Caged Escape,
We are made to do things at certain appointed times regardless of our convenience, or our children’s needs.

When the Mosney group shared this image with the larger research group, Adrian discussed his concern that the food in the accommodation centres is often high in fat, salt, and sugar. Adrian shared an image he took after some residents had butchered a chicken at his accommodation centre. He explained that he documented the act—the preparation and sharing of ‘traditional’ foods—because he conceptualised it as a form of resistance to the regulation of dietary life, and a kind of forced assimilation into a ‘Irish’ diet that asylum seekers experience in the direct provision centres (field notes 2 December 2008).

By identifying the fore-mentioned objects and places, and connecting them to key moments and concepts in their narrative scripts, participants/directors outlined central themes in their stories. Their list provided a map from which to find images that would form the visual narratives of their compositions.

Finding the images

Figure 30. Mosney apartment. Photo credit: Mosney group.
We begin first with interior locations—the sitting room (figure 30), and the entryway to the apartment (figure 31). Later, Susan will consider these internal, sunlit and quiet images for her composition. In the end, she selected the image of the entryway to evoke her memories from home and the life-affirming nostalgia that helps her through hard times. While the empty entryway with the open door is on screen, Susan shares the following memory,

I have a happy picture in my head that I always go back to whenever I want to escape the present reality of things—me and my sister sitting outside my mum’s stall in the market, watching the adults call out to each other as well as their customers. Sometimes, their chatter will go like this: “Come and buy from me, mine is fresh and cheap!” “I will give you a better discount” “A trial will convince you!” And on and on. I could never have imagined not always having that sense of security wrapped around me like a blanket (Caged Escape, 2009).

Finished with photos from inside the apartment, Susan places baby Adebayo and her toddler into a double stroller. Mona’s daughter Clare appears, and we all set out. Marie takes the Fuji Finepix and Susan, Mona and I share the Nikon. We hadn’t planned on entering the laundry room, but Susan thinks it could be a good place for images. She approaches two Irish
women working there and asks if we can take photos. I’m not sure if she gave them any explanation, or what they understood as our purpose, but they agree. The women joke with the children and seem to have a friendly relationship with Marie, Susan and Mona. I comment on the plastic plants placed high on one side of the wall, saying they look cheerful. ‘They’re covered in dust,’ one of the women answers in the dry humour I’ve come to expect in response to friendly compliments. In the Americas, compliments are often used as ice breakers and ways to signal interest and camaraderie, but in Ireland they are often met with suspicion, or self-deprecating jokes. I have felt something close to being shamed for having given a compliment, and try not to issue them, but find it difficult to overcome this custom. The women step outside to have a smoke, and we consider how to frame different images. Susan takes photographs of the signs to depict the experience of being ‘imprisoned,’ and how everything is scheduled and regimented (figure 32). Later during the workshop, Susan selected the image of the closed sign to represent the following moment in her story,

My qualifications from my country are not recognized and to make matters worse, I don’t have access to third level education. I am able bodied, willing to put my skills to good use, but then I am not allowed to work, Caged Escape (2009).

While discussing the image during workshop the following week, one of the participants asked why she had taken that particular image. Susan replied, ‘It’s where I spend my time now’ (field notes 2 December 2008). The tone of her voice and the pacing of her words elicited laughter from the group. She was ironically signalling an experience that those who laughed in recognition understood; she ‘made light’ of the economic, social and educational exclusion of living in the direct provision system—the experience of being ‘able bodied, willing to put my skills to good use, but then not allowed to work.’ In Susan’s final composition, the image of the launderette (figure 33) coupled with her spoken narrative creates a sense of anxiety and entrapment. Susan’s final production was not about her claim
for asylum, the reasons why she left her country of origin, or how she did so. Rather, Susan tells of how she copes with the economic and social isolation of living in direct provision. She worries about the impact on her children, and expresses hope—perhaps beyond belief—when she writes for her audio-visual story:

I hope someday we will look back and marvel at how far we have come (Caged Escape 2009).

Figure 32. Closed, Mosney. Photo credit: Mosney group.
Outside the launderette we take an image that according to Marie, represents the barriers asylum seekers face—a photo of shadow on gate (figure 34). Both Clare and Dillinna pose as the figure outlined in shadow on the gate, their mothers directing them where to stand. It is cold outside, but the children are delighted with our collective project; we are having fun.

We continue toward the playground. We make a series of images of children playing on the wooden climber and bridge (figure 35). During editing, Susan selected one of the images from the series for her discussion of the mistrust, disbelief and racism she and her family have encountered as asylum seekers, in particular how their nationality negatively impacts their chance of receiving refugee status. As she narrates in her story,

I never expected to have things handed to me on a platter. But then, I didn’t expect the high level of distrust and disbelief that follows one around, especially if you come from my country, Nigeria. The prejudice is so bad that we’ve already been judged and labelled liars before we open our mouths to speak. I read recently in one of the metro papers that the chance of a Nigerian getting refugee status in Ireland is 0.01%, Caged Escape (2009).
Although Susan does not explicitly articulate her concern about how this experience of institutional and social marginalisation might impact her children, during editing she combined the above narrative with the image of children in the playground. The resulting composition provides another layer of expression. This layer reveals affection, care, and trepidation--if they do receive refugee status or humanitarian leave to remain, how will these children negotiate the prejudice and marginalisation that Susan speaks to?

Children accompany us throughout the centre as their mothers and ‘aunties’ seek out, and consider different photographs. After the playground, we continue toward Marie’s apartment. For her story, Marie photographs details of the apartment for her story (figures 36-37). She makes images of the places where she remembers and thinks about her son Ray—the window above the kitchen sink (figure 36), and the family dinner table (figure 37).

Figure 34. Marie selected this image for the following moment in her story, ‘I wonder how you must be feeling. I wish so much I could turn the hands of time,’ (Ray, 2009). Photo credit: Mosney group.
Figure 35. ‘We have already been judged and labelled liars’ (Caged Escape, 2009). Mosney playground. Photo credit: Mosney group.

Figure 36. Marie selected this image for the following moment, ‘Mommy, please can I come to your house? Please mommy? These are your words Ray when I speak to you. I don’t know when my boy,’ (Ray, 2009). Photo credit: Mosney group.
Figure 37. Marie selected this image for the following moment in her story about her son Ray, ‘your sister saves you a seat at the dinner table. She asks me when we will be a family again. I don’t have any answer to her question,’ Ray, 2009. Photo credit: Mosney group.

Figure 38. I Have People I Left Back Home, (2009). Photo credit: Mosney group.
During editing, Mona selected the image of the coats hanging in the hallway (figure 38) to represent the absence of her three children who stayed behind in Liberia, and the fact that they are growing up without her. While the image of children’s winter jackets is on screen, Mona shares the following,

I miss my kids a lot. I don’t even know if I would recognize them if I saw them walking down the street, *I Have People I Left Back Home*, (2009).

The last image taken at Marie’s apartment (figure 5) is a photograph of Ogo looking through the windowpane toward another child on the other side of a closed door. Distorted by the patterns of the glass are two adult figures. There is something about the silence of the image—the two girls gazing wordlessly at one another through the glass, the two women having a conversation that can’t be heard. The spontaneous play, Ogo’s focused concentration, the patience of her friend, and the women talking nearby represent a way I have observed families to inhabit this space so often beyond their control—the sharing of child-rearing responsibilities and food preparation; the negotiation (and conflict) around limited resources; children caring for children from other families; children intently observing their environment, and finding ways to play within it. I imagine the door as a dividing barrier, and yet also a permeable border, an image that simultaneously represents separation and reunion.

We leave Marie’s apartment and come across another woman, Nadia—a playwright, and single mother from Nigeria. During my last visit she gave me a tour of Mosney in the rain, including her apartment and her new guitar, which she hopes to learn to play. I ask how she’s doing and she responds with the understated, but clear, ‘Oh, you know…’ I forget to ask about the guitar lessons. One of the children, who had been travelling along with us, stays back with Nadia (although she isn’t her child). At the dining hall it is Susan once again who speaks with the women who work there, and asks their permission to take photos.
Permission granted, unsure by whom. Susan directs people to line up in a queue and begins to take images of legs and feet waiting in line (figure 39). People seem amused to be models, but at one point we hear a woman’s voice with an Irish accent saying ‘Hello?’ in an inquiring and authoritative tone. None of us reply, or stop what we were doing; we continue quickly with the images until we were done, and the woman doesn’t insist. Susan takes photos of the dining hall, catching the words ‘Kosy Kitchen,’ (figure 40), and another one of the many signs, this one about opening hours and dining hall guidelines.

Figure 39. ‘In direct provision we are made to queue for everything; food, provisions, bus, weekly allowance, everything,’ Caged Escape, 2009. Photo credit: Mosney group.
Figure 40. Susan chose this image for the following moment, ‘Coming to Ireland has been both liberating and inhibiting,’ (Caged Escape, 2009). Photo credit: Mosney group.

Once we finish taking photos in the dining area, we walk toward Mona’s apartment, located at the opposite end of the Mosney site, near the entrance. Along the way we take photos of public phones (figure 41), rows of apartments, laundry on the line, a child’s bicycle, a Mosney walkway and a baby carriage (figure 42). When we get to Mona’s apartment, she offers us McVittie’s digestive biscuits, mango juice and a sweet ginger soda. We sit down in the relief of a warm room, inside from an increasingly dark afternoon. Mona and Marie frame photos for different interior images. Her daughter Clare sits on the couch, gazing out the window, and we take a few photos (figure 43).
Figure 41. ‘When I call home, my first son, Frank asks me, ‘Mommy, what are you doing to bring us over to you?’ I have no answer to this question,” (I Have People I Left Back Home, 2009). Photo credit: Mosney group.

Figure 42. ‘I know you think your mamma has abandoned you. I want you to know that I have not, and that I have you in my mind all the time,’ (Ray, 2009). Photo credit: Mosney group.
Figure 43. ‘Clare is my baby. She is here with me in Ireland. She is four and if I call her ‘baby’ she will tell me that she is a big girl. Clare keeps asking me about her brothers and sisters. She is hoping to see them one day,’ I Have People I Left Back Home, 2009. Photo credit: Mosney group.

We say goodbye at Mona’s apartment, and Susan and I walk past the people sitting in parked cars in the lot. Driving back to the bus stop, we talk. Susan is hoping that once she can work and study again—once she has refugee status—she’d like to study child development or nursing. Once Adebayo is a little older, she’d like to begin volunteering at the school, or maybe the local hospital. I tell her that I’d be more than happy to write letters of recommendation. The bus arrives, we hug goodbye. I board the bus, and begin going over the afternoon, writing notes and looking at photos. I remember something Mona said, ‘They say they want us to integrate, but how can we if they separate us out?’ The bus arrives at city centre just after nightfall. I walk down O’Connell past the Spire, across the tidal river of the Liffey, and continue toward Grafton. The holiday lights are beautiful. They add warmth to the evenings that come too early now. People are dressed up, and every tenth woman seems to be wearing the scent of Coco Chanel Mademoiselle. I turn onto Georges Street where a
neon sign over-head reads, ‘Nollaig Shona Duit.’ The city is buzzing with the closeness of Christmas and the promise of holiday parties (field notes, 27 November 2008).

Conclusion

Most of the images from Living in Direct Provision: 9 Stories were taken from within the walls of the asylum accommodation centres. Whether created individually as in the case of Adrian, Evelyn and Farrokh or developed collectively by Mona, Susan and Marie, practitioners documented their daily lives by finding and making these images. Collaborating with practitioners on site allowed me the opportunity to observe aspects of research participants’ lives, and to learn from participants and their families. Both the process and the artefacts served as a means to interrogate the material realities and psychological consequences of living in the Direct Provision asylum regime. The practice provided an opportunity to ethnographically examine the physical contours of the detention centres, as well as the invisible, internal landscapes of political and socio-economic exclusion. What is striking about the images is the overall absence of human faces and bodies. The interior and exterior photographs of the asylum centres reveal the liminality of asylum detention—the privatized spaces where asylum seekers live, and wait. A bunk bed, a line of queuing feet and legs, peeling wallpaper, mould in the corners of the ceiling, CCTV cameras—these images evoke the details of surveillance and institutionalisation; they interrogate an asylum system that reproduces invisibility and exclusion.

Shortly before the end of the workshop in 2009, Mona—who had travelled to Ireland from Liberia seeking asylum with her youngest daughter—received humanitarian leave to remain, moved into a two-bedroom house in Balbriggan, and began studying full-time to be a healthcare support worker. Her older children remain in Liberia. Adrian also received leave to remain in 2009. That year he became a father, and began to develop a series of images.
from within the asylum system across the Republic of Ireland. Since completing *Living in Direct Provision: 9 Stories*, Adrian graduated with his MA in visual culture, received research grants and residencies through local arts organisations, and exhibited and presented at different venues and conferences regarding his arts practice and research into Direct Provision in Ireland. Currently, he curates a photographic archive and has begun doctoral studies. Marie and her three children were deported to Lagos on a late-night Frontex flight in 2009.

**Stories**

Please view 69/851/07 by Adrian, *I have people I left back home* by Mona, and *Ray* by Marie at:

Chapter 5
From production to distribution: Encounters of political listening

In and out of the workshop site, participants were aware of potential disbelief, and restrictions on their stories. They expressed worry about how certain collaborating partners might respond to the finished digital stories. In particular—Abazu, Rebecca and Zaman—repeatedly asked if their story was ‘okay,’ if they could ‘really’ tell it, and if the collaborating agencies would approve of their stories. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 3, several research subjects demonstrated an understanding of the strategic and symbolic positioning and significance of their stories; they did not want to appear dangerously ‘ungrateful,’ or to be seen as ‘complaining,’ or ‘giving out’ (field notes November 19, 2008). This discursive complexity undergirded the entire production cycle.

Indeed, central to the act of storytelling is revelation and concealment. What to keep private? What to share? What is authorized? What cannot be told or shown? Literally
visualising the voice—developing an audio-visual narrative—brought these questions to the forefront as participants considered what to reveal, and how to maintain anonymity. The majority of practitioners vigilantly edited their audio-visual compositions exclusively with non-identifying images. For example, as discussed in Chapter 2, Edwina developed her own compositional approach to maintaining anonymity and moved beyond the evidential in her photographic practice. Another participant, Pierre, opted not to use photographs at all. Instead, he enlisted his 10-year-old daughter to draw the images for his story (figure 3). Other participants, like Abdel, Lyubov, Mona and Marie, selected images of their loved ones for their audio-visual compositions—consciously choosing to be audibly and visually present in their productions. Within a community of practice, participants engaged in on-going dialogue about these decisions regarding their images, scripts, and stories.

As research participants considered their experiences through the audio-visual, as they developed images and wrote scripts, conflicting concerns emerged. The production and potential distribution of the stories revealed assumptions held by diverse stakeholders—community workers, interpreters, NGO program directors, and board members—about what undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees presumably did and did not know, what they should and should not say, and what the ‘Irish public’ was and was not ready to hear and see (field notes May 16, 2009). In both digital storytelling research projects, collaborating partners had specific ideas about what kinds of stories would and would not serve sectorial interests, provide the ‘right’ message, or be heard by a ‘public that disbelieves.’ Within the workshop setting these assumptions could be considered and discussed, but outside the workshop setting it proved to be more difficult. This lack of dialogue created misunderstandings and ultimately inhibited public engagement with the stories that participants had produced. Here is where thoughtful attention to what I am calling
‘encounters of political listening’ could be a helpful contribution to future collaborations—specifically when there is interest and anticipation among research participants that their stories be screened beyond the workshop site.

**Encounters of political listening**

Dreher (2009) and Bickford (1996) remind us that not all audiences are created equal; ‘entrenched hierarchies of attention…produce unequal opportunities for speaking and being heard’ (Dreher 2009: 446). Considering these unequal opportunities, Stuart Hall (1997b) argued for an examination of the power relations inherent in the production and consumption of representations aiming to make audible and visible experiences that have been silenced or denied public consideration. Given that some voices are more discursively privileged, attention to listening in the presence of conflict becomes key. To reiterate Bickford’s ideas regarding listening (1996), it is the presence of inequality that compels communicative interaction. This speaking and listening together does not guarantee resolution to the conflicts arising from inequality. Rather, it is the attention to listening that ‘enables political actors to decide democratically how to act in the face of conflict, and to clarify the nature of the conflict at hand’ (Bickford 1996: 2).

In the *Living in Direct Provision* project, once participants had completed draft versions of their stories, a board meeting was called. An NGO partner had raised concern about the potential harm and legal ramifications of two of the digital stories—*Aduro Life*, and *One Day I Will Not Forget*. *Aduro Life* addressed the sexualisation of black African women in the asylum centres, and *One Day I Will Not Forget* told of an encounter on a public bus that the storyteller considered to be racist. In addition to these two stories ‘in question,’ all nine stories were screened to board members at that time. Board members proceeded to discuss the veracity of the stories, make editing and script revision recommendations, critique the
images created by participants, and consider the possible legal implications of publicly releasing the stories (field notes January 30, 2009).

Of course, it should be of no surprise that organisational gatekeepers would want to exert some degree of control over the end-result, but given that digital stories ‘privilege participant subjectivities’ (Gubrium & Hill 2013: 1), this interface between small-scale, qualitative research and larger-scale institutional restraints created a particularly delicate dynamic that is ultimately instructive. The board meeting could have provided an opportunity for participants, facilitator/researcher, media centre, and collaborating agencies to outline and clarify diverse concerns, strategise around conflicting interests and commitments, and discuss the crucial legal and ethical questions at hand. Instead, breaking with the participatory pedagogy and ethos of the project, research subjects were not present at the board meeting to listen, or be heard. Furthermore, storytellers were not invited to participate in the discussions regarding publication and dissemination of the materials. Due to the exclusion of the authors and co-producers of the stories—the women and men who had led the process through their practice—the project risked becoming a top-down production directed by media professionals and experts, CEOs and executive directors. Instead of upholding the innovative methodology at the core of the research, the project was pushed to the borders of listening as participants’ stories were at times patronised, interrogated and disbelieved—this time, by the agencies that set out to advocate in their interest44 (field notes January 30, 2009). Not inviting research participants to the table at this

44 This experience held resonance with Angel-Ajani’s discussion (2006) of the ways in which her research with incarcerated women was persistently interrogated for ‘veracity’ and how, as researchers, we often find ourselves assembling evidence and testifying ‘in a (court) room of (our) peers’ (2006:78). See her article for an insightful exploration on listening within ethnographic labour.
decisive stage potentially jeopardized the project’s integrity, and the trust developed over the course of months, and years.

After the board meeting I met one-on-one with every practitioner to discuss the comments and recommendations that board members had made about the draft version of their documentary essay. Based on practitioners’ feedback regarding possible edits to their composition, I liaised with the post-production editor. Once post-production edits were complete, I took the stories back to practitioners and discussed the edited version. This process continued back and forth until practitioners and commissioning body were satisfied with the final version of the story. At this time, the commissioning body upheld their agreement to organize a premiere screening of the stories at the Irish Film Institute (IFI) in Dublin. *Living in Direct Provision: 9 Stories* screened on 28 May 2009. At the screening, Evelyn welcomed the audience with the following statement:

> These are our stories, written from the heart, with no guards on our emotions, our experiences, or our ideas as single women, fathers, mothers, Asian, African, non-English speaking, Christian and Muslim people living in direct provision centres across the country. Our stories might be different, but the frustrations are the same. Dreams have been shattered, self-esteem destroyed, talents wasted, the steam and fire of our labour years put out, except for that familiar label: ‘a bunch of asylum seekers.’ We did not participate in this project to evoke sympathy, but to remind this society that the mental health of every individual, even that of an asylum seeker, is an important decimal in the economic data of any society. I could go on and on, but our images and sounds will do the job. On this note, I leave the stage for our films to speak our words.

Evelyn’s statement recognizes the heterogeneity of the stories, and the commonality of a systemic problem. The reason for participation in the research, as she defined it, was decidedly not to ‘evoke sympathy.’ Rather, she asked the viewer to listen beyond categorical assumptions and to seriously consider the human cost of an asylum policy that fails the women, children and men who seek international protection in Ireland. In that moment, at an historic art-house cinema, among an audience of decision makers,
community workers, academics, and loved ones, research participants–storytellers and practitioners–crossed a border. It marked the end of a six-month participatory inquiry and production process and a potential beginning–the reception of the stories themselves.

**Discussion**

Although research participants had been told their work would be distributed in DVD format, in the end the stories were not released publicly as originally agreed. Due to a lack of communication, it is difficult to know why certain decisions regarding distribution were made; research participants and I were not informed. Certainly, there were extenuating circumstances and organisations were facing substantial challenges and hard decisions. For example, by the time participants had completed their stories, funding cycles were ending, the recession was taking hold, the futures of collaborating NGOs were becoming increasingly precarious, organisational tensions appeared to be impacting interactions within and between collaborating bodies, and as previously noted, communication had broken down. In addition to these limitations, there appeared to be apprehension toward distributing the stories. But there was no clear and public communication about the decision. One informal explanation was that the Irish climate was ‘too hostile’ to publicly release the *Living in Direct Provision: 9 Stories*; that Irish audiences ‘were not ready’ to hear them, and that they would not be well received (field notes May 16, 2009). This assessment was made without consulting research participants, or inviting them into conversation; there was no chance to un-pack the assumption about what the ‘Irish audience’ was and was not ready for, or to consider and discuss alternative and diverse distribution options. Local and regional organisations expressed interest in screening the stories, graduate students and journalists wanted to learn more about the project, but this public interest was met with mistrust from the commissioning body. This created considerable confusion. The apparent paternalism
toward research participants, the sense of censorship and the debilitating lack of communication proved discouraging. Were not the stories made to be seen? Wasn’t one of the purposes of the project to increase awareness of immigration and integration issues? Should not research participants be brought into the institutional discussion regarding distribution? There was no opportunity to introduce these questions into any kind of sustained dialogue. This conclusion to a promising cross-sectorial project in which collaborating organisations invested material resources and support, and marginalised subjects invested time and interest left some participants feeling concerned. One participant evaluated the process in the following way:

Through the process of coming together every week we were able to create a digital story. I enjoyed that. I had never combined my skills in this way with Final Cut. I enjoyed coming on the train to Dublin, having a cup of coffee, a sandwich, talking with the others, getting that sense of community. What I didn’t like was that after completing such an excellent project, after creating something so good, after the IFI (Irish Film Institute screening), I didn’t like what happened with the distribution. The stories were not distributed. There was no more discussion about how to exhibit the work. It became more about an institution than the power of the individual stories and how we would get them out. Who owns them? Who has the copyright? It shouldn’t be (just one group). These are archival artefacts that should be available to people (interview, February 7, 2012).

In her discussion of visual research methods and ethics, Sarah Pink (2007: 52-61) notes that questions of ethical harm and anxiety to individual research subjects, institutions, and/or researchers are often most pressing when research comes to publication and dissemination (2007: 56). As discussed, this is precisely where the research project encountered problems. Once the ethnographic labour of building trust and developing participatory research relationships bore fruit; once the teaching of media skills, and the creative labour of developing storylines, scripts and images was complete, communication broke down, materials were appropriated for publication, and participants were not invited to the table. I do not believe this was intentional or malicious. Rather, the dynamic underscored power
asymmetries that served to simultaneously highlight both an absence of listening, and an urgent need for listening. It also pointed to the difficulties of developing reciprocal acts of listening when the privilege to not listen is sustained and protected through entrenched hierarchies of voice. Nick Couldry speaks to this power dynamic when he writes,

(T)he context required for acts of listening to be effective is a complex one. By listening, we acknowledge each other’s status as being capable of giving an account of ourselves in the world we share. A single act of listening can therefore be undermined by a wider pattern of action where reciprocity between the same parties is missing (2010: 146).

Facilitating participatory research practices with, among and between research subjects does not supplant the need to examine and consider power relations in the academic, nongovernmental and professional media settings that enable participatory media research. A critical attention to encounters of political listening could offer opportunities to determine the ‘wider patterns of action,’ (Couldry 2010: 146) that facilitate, and restrict voice.

But how much ‘agency’ can be attributed to the decision makers from collaborating agencies and gatekeepers? To what extent were they in a position to act upon the views and requests of storytelling research participants? The ability of representational bodies to listen to, and potentially act in relationship with storytellers is difficult to ascertain. Here, the wider patterns of action—the overarching managerial, legal, political and economic constraints—are instructive; they point to the challenges of research within unwittingly deaf institutions (rather than with purposefully deaf individuals). In this regard, not only did the obvious importance of internal communication regarding production, post-production, release and distribution become clear, but also the less considered importance of imagining the project into, and beyond release and distribution. When agencies are working to ‘amplify’ ‘migrant voices,’ the development of audio-visual ethnographic research requires a team that not only includes research participants, but also stakeholders who are responsible to participants,
respect the autonomy of the research community of practice, and are committed to
discussing the contradictions and challenges that arise in participatory research. Clearly
established, and actively negotiated agreements regarding decision-making across difference–
from visual and spoken story gestation to production, post-production to dissemination–are
essential. The discussions that determine these agreements need to move beyond the
furthering of institutional, advocacy or research agendas in order to generate sophisticated
thinking about the agency and rights of the storytelling participants,\(^{45}\) and to envision the
potential indirect and direct impacts of the collective labour of audio-visual inquiry.

\(^{45}\) For a discussion of the rights of digital storytelling participants and responsibilities of facilitators, researchers
and agencies see Gubrium, Hill & Flicker, 2013 and Hill, 2014. For discussion on ethics in visual anthropology,
see Perry & Marion, 2010. For discussion on ethics in relation to ‘difficult stories’ see Sheftel & Zembrzycki,
2010.
Conclusion

This engaged ethnography of media production, together with the artefacts collaboratively crafted with research participants, proffer a nuanced and moving account of contemporary migration in Ireland. The research presented in the thesis provides sophisticated theoretical, methodological, pedagogical and political insights into the challenges and affordances of inquiry through documentary arts practice. The longitudinal study is unparalleled in its scope—it follows the contours of a shared anthropology, centring the creative labour of undocumented migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland. The majority of research on the use of digital storytelling focuses on short-term projects, with limited, if any, attention to the central themes of this thesis. These include the following:

1. The human cost of asylum and migrant labour regimes.
2. The ethical, aesthetic and political affordances and dilemmas of inquiry and participatory knowledge production through audio-visual authoring.
3. The possibilities for political listening through the sustained development of narrative exchange within and across a community of practice.

Because of the significant adaptations made to the pivotal Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) model, ‘co-creative documentary’ is presented as a concept that forwards a longitudinal and inquiry-based approach to first person, audio-visual narrative. Subsequently, the concept and practice of ‘co-creative documentary’ as presented in this thesis offers a significant contribution to the fields of anthropology, social documentary arts, and migration studies; it places emphasis on the engagement with audio-visual practice as a poetic means for critical inquiry and knowledge production within the broader project of propagating participatory research and culture.
Theoretical and Pedagogical Contributions

The research generates three main theoretical contributions. First, it expands the Freirean concept of ‘de-codification’ or ‘problem posing’ by positioning digital stories as auto-ethnographic codes that are constituted as the storyteller ‘objectifies’ lived experience into aesthetic creation. These objects of thought can facilitate personal and collective inquiry while holding expressive and communicative power.

Next, the study builds upon current research on listening to activate a ‘politics of listening’ that serves to reveal inherent complexities of participatory knowledge production through media practice in efforts toward a shared anthropology. Given the difficulty of determining how any given story might directly or indirectly impact public policy and debate, I propose that political listening not be conceptualised as something that occurs primarily, or most importantly, after the co-creative labour is complete. Rather, encounters of political listening occur among research practitioners and other stakeholders across the research site throughout production and into distribution. Attention to these encounters of political listening—from conceptualising and mentoring research participants as emergent media ethnographers to understanding media production as both a site of collaboration and contestation—provides a framework for theorising the contradictions of developing shared practices within proprietary contexts and societies that disbelieve migrants.

The final theoretical contribution has to do with the relationship between image and text. Although many digital storytelling facilitators and/or researchers understand the centrality of sound and image in audio-visual storytelling, there are many others who privilege the written and spoken word, and do not conceptualise their labour as connected to filmmaking, photography, or social documentary practice and theory. Since digital storytelling is generated through audio-visual platforms, this is a significant oversight; both
the process and the artefacts present opportunities for rigorous theoretical and methodological consideration of sound, image and montage in relation to complex social and political issues. The longitudinal and inquiry-based form of digital storytelling forwarded in this research placed greater emphasis on the making of images and the development of montage. Instead of understanding images as tools for eliciting information, or data and evidence of ‘what really happened,’ images were conceptualised as meditational and ‘useful objects’ that facilitate both poetic and analytical engagements with experience. By observing how participants audio-visually reflected upon, and made meaning of their experiences, the research explores how the visual served participants as a medium for expressive and creative inquiry. In the documentary essays, as well as throughout the thesis, a productive tension is created through the relationship between the image and the spoken and written word. Given the on-going tendency toward employing moving and still image primarily as ‘data’ that is subservient to the written text, this also constitutes a significant contribution.

**Methodological and Political Contributions**

The method of co-creative documentary facilitated dynamic opportunities for inquiry into asylum and migrant labour regimes, recognition of storytellers and stories, and sustained encounters of narrative exchange. The generative space of the longitudinal seminar provided a place and time in which participants interpreted, analysed and documented their experiences as newcomers to Ireland. Through the collaborative art of storytelling and the introspective and mediated practice of exploring meaning through script writing, image making and audio-visual editing, each participant engaged in remembering, re-constituting and performing a story of their selection. A dialogical approach to storytelling that engages processes of remembering, meaning making and the re-constituting of lived experiences through the creation of a digital story is purposefully different than the testimonial
performances that frequently populate the public policy and NGO sectors. It constituted an essential aspect of a multifaceted epistemological frame that not only responded to the complex phenomena of migration, but to the urgency and demand for ‘story.’ The development of a co-creative documentary practice, significant attention to media production values, and consistent mentoring in photography and audio-visual editing constituted productive ways of taking storytellers, their stories, and the labour of documentary story production seriously. Subsequently, the media production site grounded on-going dialogue and debate. From one-on-one discussions with research participants about the potential implications of speaking visibly, to discussions with institutional gatekeepers about ‘campaign compatible’ stories and the possible legal implications of the documentary essays, the production process—over time and across sectors—presented opportunities to question assumptions about what constitutes a ‘migrant’ story and how ‘best’ to tell these stories throughout the academic, nongovernmental and professional media settings that enable and restrict voice and listening. These contributions can be useful to scholars, filmmakers and other practitioners and artists in developing co-creative means of inquiry through the audio-visual and performing arts. Perhaps most importantly, they can assist in thinking through the ways in which practice can ground dialogue that values heterogeneous experiences and stories.

The artefacts developed through the research collaboration—the thirteen documentary essays—are a noteworthy and exceptional contribution. These evocative accounts reveal the human cost of state-sanctioned liminality and societal indifference in nuanced and generative ways. Great care is given to the development of the visual montage, but the quality of the spoken word is also worth noting. In contrast to the rules of storytelling enforced in asylum proceedings, participants’ stories are more akin to meditation
than legal testimony or political confession. As noted in the thesis, the way a story is told in the asylum proceedings determines whether one will be granted status or not: often what matters is not the veracity of the story, or the ability to communicate it, but the ‘plausibility’ of the story and the ‘believability’ of the storyteller. Of equal importance is the tempo of these stories, both in terms of the time it took to think through and compose them and the lifespan they refer to. A foundational theme in many of the stories is memory, not simply intended as the act of recuperating a past event, but as something that actively shapes the present, and contemplates the future.46

**Implications**

Drawing from the lessons of this study, the development of a co-creative documentary practice necessitates greater attention to the potentially contested issues of authorship, ownership, and distribution through these purposeful encounters of political listening. The encounters could provide collaborating agencies, research participants and researchers with the necessary time and space to explore research expectations among the diverse actors, interrogate assumptions, explore consequences, and strategise around public engagement with documentary stories. In the process, we would begin to theorise listening—not only within the workshop site, but also among collaborating actors in diverse positions of power—in order to create much-needed opportunities for ‘deciding democratically how to act in the face of conflict’ (Bickford 1996: 2).

Filmmaking professionals increasingly discuss integrated media and distribution strategies including ‘trans-media’ platforms that support sound, photography, text, and moving image. The largest documentary film festival in the world, the *International*

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46 Thanks to Elena Moreo for her keen observations and comments that influenced my thinking about how the artefacts perform.
Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), has recently developed a digital storytelling strand and competition (IDFA DocLab). Interestingly, SERIAL, the audio podcast phenomena produced by the public radio broadcast, This American Life, won the 2014 digital storytelling award. Professional journalists and media producers developed this documentary storytelling series, but there are growing examples of novice, community, and university-based storytellers producing documentary stories in collaboration with professional mentors. One particularly vibrant example is The Stanford Storytelling Project at Stanford University. In these sites, among others, there are ample possibilities for ethnographic inquiry exploring how stories are constructed, why and where they matter, and for whom. Given the centrality of sound to audio-visual experience, there are rich prospects for sonic ethnography through location sound recording. This additional layer of storytelling could provide a more sensorial and immersive approach to representing and experiencing place and memory. Here it is important to note the groundbreaking work of the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, and the critical success their films have garnered within and beyond academia.

Finally, because of a perceived illegitimacy of the international right to claim asylum and the increasing precariousness of human life relegated to the border—to traumatic and deadly international crossings, to refugee camps and internal detention centres—there is both an institutional demand for, and a psychological urgency in, ‘the asylum story.’ This context calls upon scholars to interrogate the ways in which ‘the asylum story’ is instrumentalised in fortifying exclusionary policies and systems, and to explore ways in which storytelling might

50 See Community-Based Multiliteracies & Digital Media Projects: Questioning Assumption and Exploring Realities, Pleasants & Salter (2014).
implicate the listener, while accompanying the storyteller in the telling of heterogeneous experiences of living migration.

**Postscript**

Three years after the completion of the research, I travelled to Mosney to meet with Susan. She was the last participant still to be living there. We had communicated via SMS and email, but I hadn’t seen her in person since leaving Dublin. When I began visiting Mosney in 2008, research participants’ apartments had little in the way of photographs hung on the wall, or keepsakes that belonged to the families who lived there. During our last visit, I noticed that Susan had decorated the apartment—placing her children’s drawings, photographs, and activities from school on the walls throughout. She told me her husband had argued against her initiative. For him, the idea of decorating their apartment felt like acceding to a situation of permanent uncertainty. Nevertheless, Susan decided that in their seventh year of direct provision, she needed to make the space for herself and her children more ‘like home’ (field notes, February 1, 2012). At the time of writing (2014), Susan and her family remain at Mosney in their ninth year of Direct Provision. When we spoke about the seminar she said the following,

I wanted to do something, create something. I needed an escape route. I had worked in advertising and print media back home, so participating in the seminar was like coming home for me. It brought some healing; it helped me to move on from where I was. Meeting new people and staying in touch with those who became my friends has helped a lot too. It was my first experience in a university level course. I had taken many workshops before, but they were all sitting around in a circle, talking about things. This was the first workshop where we actually created something (interview with Susan, February 1, 2012).

Through the reflexive practice of making meaning through image making, creative writing and audio-visual editing, practitioners critically considered their experiences as newcomers to

53 In particular see *Manakamana* and *Leviathan*. 
Ireland. The method was messy and complex and imperfect, but it offered opportunities in which participants listened to themselves and each other. It promoted the development of ethnographic relationships of trust and reciprocity, and facilitated an interrogation of migration policy within a community of practice. Finally, it provided participants with a small, but tangible outcome—an audio-visual documentary essay of broadcast quality, and as Susan observed, an opportunity to ‘create something.’ By ‘really creating something,’ practitioners fortified a public self, acting into, as Hannah Arendt wrote, ‘a web of human relationships’ (1958: 181-88)—in all the uncertainty and possibility that implies.
Appendix

**Documentary Storytelling Guidelines and Requirements**

Each participant will select one story of his or her choice.

The story can be on any theme the participant chooses.

The story must be a first-person account based on lived experiences.

Each audio-visual story will be 2-3 minutes in duration.

Participants will make, select, and edit between 10-12 images for their digital story.

All images in the audio-visual story will be created and/or conceived and/or co-created by the participant.

Participants will write a script of approximately 250 words (or less).

Participants will use ambient sound in their digital stories; the use of music must be justified.

Participants will edit the first cut of their multimedia story to the best of her/his ability, and share this rough cut with their community of practitioners for feedback.

Participants will have the final say on any and all proposed post-production edits.

Participants will discuss and decide if, and where, to screen their final compositions.

At the end of the workshop, participants will choose whether or not to screen their audio-visual story beyond the workshop site.
Abdel’s Story

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. After a hard life in Morocco, my friends advised me to go to Ireland for a change and better life. One of my friends prepared my travel visa and my work permit so I could come to Ireland legally. With the hopes to find what I was looking for I left my family, my mum, my dad and brothers.

Everything was fine until after 6 months when the problems started showing up in my life. The wages were poor; the work was hard and unacceptable. I worked long hours without sleeping. I had no breaks. All these things were putting me under pressure, especially when my wife came over and gave birth to our baby daughter. At this time I asked my boss to raise my wages to 8 euro. He refused. I was in shock. After a long conversation I realized that he was not going to renew my work permit. I left him and after one month I found another employer. I applied with a valid visa when my work permit expired. I was refused. That’s when I became undocumented in the country that let me down, struggling once again.

Now it’s been about three years that I am away from home and I am homesick. My children miss my family and our homeland. They give me the courage to make an effort to get something done. I started looking again for an employer who can apply for me, but it was especially hard to find someone because the government had established a new harder and more complicated law.

I finally have found an employer who will apply for a work permit for me. I hope that I will get it.
Edwina’s Story

My country was going through some tough times and getting worse. 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.

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.

Living on the edge, stressed out, looking over my shoulder and feeling like a criminal. Any knock on the door, any Garda 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.
Lyubov’s Story

Yesterday my daughter called to tell me she’s getting married. I was very happy to hear the good news, but I realized I would never see her smiling face on her wedding day. I am staying in Ireland illegally.

We have a tradition in Ukraine. If someone is leaving home for a long period of time, the mother gives you an oberikh, 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. These years turned out to be very hard and difficult for me.

I came to Ireland on a work permit to work on a mushroom farm. The job was very difficult — I had to work 16 hours a day without any days off and the pay was meagre. I took a high interest loan in the bank, but had no opportunity to repay it. So I had to leave the mushroom farm after eight months and start looking for another job.

Circumstances led me to Dublin where I came to the capital city without any support from anybody, without any friends, without any English. For two longs months I was without a job. Later on, doing occasional jobs, it became possible for me to support myself and pay my rent. My first year of staying legally in this country was over and now I was staying in the country illegally. I became illegal, but in the end I found a cleaning company who agreed to provide me with documents.

For a whole two years I was working with this company and they promised to provide me with documents. In the end they fired me and explained they applied three times for my papers, and three times my papers came back, and that’s why I couldn’t work for them without a permit. So I was back on the streets without documents. It’s hard to imagine how many people I asked for help, but all doors were closed to me. Migrant Rights Centre
offered a helping hand. There I met a lawyer who explained the laws to me. I also made friends who are supporting me. I gained hope.

I am sure I will get the work permit and I will go back to my country to see my children and my family, but most importantly, I will see my dearest mom who has been waiting so long for me.
Zaman’s Story

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.

One day, my father in the kitchen made some food for us. My father called me into the kitchen. He told me,

‘Come here son. You should learn to make your own food. I will show you how to make food.’ I thought about my father’s words. I said,

‘What are you saying Baba? I’m not gonna’ be a chef. I’m going to be a Computer Engineer.’ My father told me,

‘Son in the whole world you want to know about anything that’s good for you. Whether you choose to do them professionally, or not, you need to learn about everything, even hard things.’

Yeah, he made me think.

Now I’m used to making food and I’m an experienced Chef. I can’t believe it. My father was like a philosopher and I feel so much, so much.

My father used to tell me, ‘Son, when I’m passed, you will feel me a lot.’

Exactly. I feel so much my father. He was right. But it is not possible for my papa to come back to me.

‘Papa, can you hear me? I would like to talk to you just one moment please Papa, please.’
Aduro Life
By Rebecca

Aduro life! What a life! Aduro 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. I got busy volunteering with NGOs. Did I make friends and meet people? I sure did! But! 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. They are viewed as sex tools. At first this confused and hurt me, but gradually it stirred up a lot of anger! Why do they do this? Are others aware? How can we change this?

I went to a nightclub with a friend of mine. It seemed a lovely outing until we met some Irish men who started chatting us up. When I mentioned I was an asylum seeker, one of them offered to take me home and promised to give me a full Irish breakfast in the morning in exchange for a good time! What an insult.

After six months in the asylum system I met Andy outside my hostel. Andy introduced himself and told me he had loads of friends who were TDs and councillors. He seemed to take a genuine interest in helping me out. I was so glad I had finally met someone who would help. He would ask me, ‘Are you ok?’ ‘Is there anything you need?’ ‘How can I help?’ ‘How are you coping with 19 euro 10 cent a week?’ He knew so much about the system. One day Andy visited me and said, ‘don’t take this wrongly, but I can offer you 100 euro each time if you let me have sex with you.’

To this day Andy continues to do this. Other female asylum seekers I know have been his victims. He offers to give references, money and introduce them to important
people who can help. Andy is one of many men from the host community who navigate around my hostel like sharks in search of sex. This kind of abuse is connected to the high levels of female depression in direct provision centres.

Who will take this seriously? It’s a hard, hard life.

How do I socialise without feeling like a financial burden on others? How do I keep in touch with my family at home? How can I find love with a non-asylum seeker without him thinking he’s being used? I don’t know what to do. I’m helpless, frustrated and lately, developing suicidal thoughts. I can’t even afford alcoholism even though I know Lidl sells cheap booze! Who can help? I’m tired of not living! My life is at a standstill! Aduro!
My dad dreamed of living on an island. Living on an island sounded so exotic. But should he feel happy for me because I now live on an island? 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. Back home, my wife and I we were professionals. But here in Ireland our university qualifications turn out to be a burden to carry. They are not yet recognized. Obviously, life is different here. A little good weather makes people talk. Our island is cloudy, windy and rainy. Nothing like the tropical storms back home. When I hear Irish people complaining about their country, I would like them to look outside their immediate conditions and consider the civil wars, massive human rights violations, political impunity and humanitarian catastrophes of other parts of the world. I think they would feel better if they compared their experiences to countries with poor conditions. Sadly, I have learned that on our island the suicide rate is high, even among youngsters. Life is not easy for us here either. We have to face integration hurdles like speaking a new language and stumbling blocks like being a different colour. We would be better off with a bit less prejudice. Maybe it’s an impossible wish. We also have to face changes that occur within Ireland. People say things were better a couple of years ago. They also say that the system got tougher because other immigrants have abused the system before us. But we are not those people. We hope our children will integrate better. I think they could have a future here. But for my wife and I, how can we imagine a future on this island when we cannot exercise our professions?
Caged Escape
By Susan

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 have a happy picture in my head that I always go back to whenever I want to escape from the present reality of things–me and my sister sitting outside my mum’s stall in the market, watching the adults call out to each other as well as their customers. Sometimes, their chatter will go like this:

“Come and buy from me!”
“Mine is fresh and cheap!”
“I will give you a better discount!”
“A trial will convince you!”

And on and on and on…

I could never have imagined not always having that sense of security wrapped around me like a blanket.

Coming to Ireland has been both liberating and inhibiting. I never expected to have things handed to me on a platter but then, I didn’t expect the high level of distrust and disbelief that follows one around, especially when you come from my country, Nigeria.

The prejudice is so bad that we’ve already been judged and labelled liars before we even open our mouths to speak. I read recently in one of the Metro papers that the chance of a Nigerian getting refugee status in Ireland is 0.01%. This is a direct reflection on now the process treats Nigerians.
In direct provision hostels we are made to queue for everything – food, provisions, bus, weekly allowance. Everything. We are made to do things at certain appointed times regardless of our convenience, or our children’s needs.

My qualifications from my country are not recognized and to make things worse, I don’t have access to third level education. I am able bodied, willing to put my skills to good use, but then I am not allowed to work.

How will it all end? My children are quite small. I wonder what answer I can give them at this stage, when I myself do not know. They do not know any other home apart from the one here. They look at me with questions in their eyes searching for direction, answers and hope. I pray that one day we will all look back and marvel at how far we have come.
Crossing Over
By Evelyn

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. Going to the GP is out of the question. I have seen him five times in one month. I know this is the pulse of frustration—whose height cannot be measured, nor bounds determined by a mere stethoscope.

This is my third year in the direct provision hostel and I have learned that asylum seekers visit the GP four times more frequently than normal Irish people. The pressure in here is so high that everybody seems to be furious over little things. If you ask me, I would say that most of our ailments are stress-related.

I look up—it’s Funmi. Not again!
It is her 5\textsuperscript{th} year in the hostel so she’s a ‘bag of trouble.’
Being a member of the Resident’s Committee, I am confronted with all kinds of situations. Most times, I get so furious about whom to direct my anger at. Is it the asylum system that piles up people together for years of idleness? Or, our greedy country leaders who send their youth scrambling for safety?

Despite my headache, I counsel Funmi. Just then, Carolyn bursts into my room, raging, swearing and cursing.
“What again?” I ask.
“Do you know that my solicitor said my case would be great if I wasn’t a Nigerian?”
I stare at her, wondering how my country got to be a ‘sinful nation’ in the eyes of the world.
“Funmi! Funmi! Funmi!” I can hear the lady in room 10 calling out,
“You have a registered post!”
There is a drop-pin silence.
This is one moment that every asylum seekers dreads, it is the decider—either you are in, or you are out.

We all cluster around Funmi, her heartbeat vibrating like a Nokia phone.
After five stressful years Funmi received her leave to remain. What a situation! Five years of being on the waiting line, and one minute of crossing over.
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. At times they need to charge the phone with the car battery and if my mummy did not see anyone to charge the battery, there is no phone.

When I call home my first son, Frank, asks me, ‘Mommy what are you doing to bring us over to you?’ I have no answer to that question. I pick up my courage and tell him that ‘one day God will bring us together. One day. We have to be prayerful.’

I miss my kids a lot. I don’t even know if I would recognize them if I saw them walking down the street. It’s been a long time. I miss their birthday parties. My second son, Kenneth, always reminds me of his birthday. He hopes I will come home and celebrate his birthday with him. Dreams that never come true.

Clare is my baby. She is here with me in Ireland. She is four and if I call her baby she will tell me she is a big girl. Clare keeps asking me about her brothers and sisters. She is hoping to see them one day.
New Ways
By Farrokh

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.

In Tehran I worked as an engineer. I had a good position in a factory as a tool and mould maker. I belonged to a happy, loving family. I was very patient, a healthy person, always optimistic about the future! But life became difficult; it was unsafe for me and I had to leave Iran.

*Man be in dar na pay beshmato jab amadeham.*
(I have not come here seeking prestige or recognition).

*Az farseh badeh inja be panah amadeham.*
(Rather, I have come searching shelter and protection).

Three years ago I came to Ireland seeking asylum. I was placed in the Birchwood House hostel in Waterford City. I live there with about 160 other people. We are not allowed to work, not allowed to study.

After a few months I met a lovely girl. We understood each other well; we had a lot in common. I fell in love with her. We planned to get married. To get married she said I had to get refugee status. When my application for asylum was refused, I realized she did not value me without refugee status. I feel interior. Finally, we broke up.

At the Birchwood House I have to share a room with four other men. At night when I want to sleep someone is watching television, someone else is snoring loudly and someone else is smoking. Sometimes the temperature is too hot and sometimes it’s too cold. It’s impossible to sleep soundly.

I have no one who understands my own language to talk to. It’s really hard to express myself in English. No one is willing to listen.
That night I couldn’t sleep. The lights were out. But the guy next door had been talking loudly all night. Suddenly we heard water overflowing from the sink. It smelled terrible. It spilled all over our room, destroying all my books, photographs and documents. I went to ask for help from the centre’s reception but nobody could help us. Burning with frustration and out of control, I punched the wall and broke my hand.

For a while I looked after my hand and it healed. Now, I need to look after my heart and my life. As any asylum seeker I know my situation won’t change quickly. It is difficult, but I have to keep going. As I let go of the old way, a new way is shown to me.
One Day I Will Not Forget
By Abazu

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.

I was on my way to Drogheda for a Saint Patrick’s Day television programme. On approaching Drogheda, I told the bus driver where I needed to get off. Another passenger told the driver where he would stop. The driver said I should get off with the passenger who was to get off before me. I thought he was joking. I repeated to the driver that I wished to get off at the Black Bull bus stop and not the Five Oaks bus stop. The driver said that I had to get off at the stop before mine. I protested, but the driver insisted. Despite my pleas the driver refused to stop for me at my requested stop. No other passenger intervened on my behalf. No one asked the driver why he was refusing to stop for me. The passengers just looked at me as if I was guilty of an offense I was not aware of. The look on their faces made it obvious that I was not welcome. The driver enjoyed the frustration his action caused me and without any atom of care he drove past my stop. He ordered me off the bus at the next stop.

When I told me colleagues about my experience, they encouraged me to complain. I did. People were sympathetic about my ordeal, but warned that I should not push for my rights because I am an asylum seeker.

I believe we have a collective responsibility to challenge discrimination and to hold each other accountable. If it were not for my present circumstances as an asylum seeker awaiting a decision, I would have handled this situation differently. Sometimes when I recount this story, it brings tears to my eyes. It reminds me of my loss of dignity. In Nigeria I was somebody and here I am being treated as a nobody. I wish people were encouraged to speak out whether they are asylum seekers or not. If my rights were not restricted, I would have spoken out fearlessly and by my actions the driver would have been held accountable for his discrimination. This was a day I will not forget.
Ray
By Marie

“Mummy, please, can I come to your house?” Please mummy?”
These are your words, Ray, when I speak to you.
I don’t know when my boy.

I know you think your mama has abandoned you. I want you to know that I have not and that I have you in my mind all the time.

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. So attached to your mama that everyone called you a ‘mummy’s boy.’

My boy. You were born so big and different, so beautiful, always cheerful, always happy. I don’t have any photos from that time of you and I together. My heart aches, especially on your birthday, Ray.

I hear you go around the house calling out for your brother and sister to come out of hiding. How do I explain that I have not abandoned you? How do I make up for these lost years?

It was very painful leaving without you, not knowing if you were safe. Suddenly you were not there. They promised you would join me in two weeks. Two weeks that has turned to years.

Your sister saves you a seat at the dinner table. She asks me when we will be a family again. I don’t have any answer to her question. Your brother and sister miss you so much Ray.

Now, when I speak to you on the phone you sound so low. I cry because this is not my Ray, the one who is full of life. I wonder how you must be feeling. I wish so much I could turn the hands of time. That I can make you feel better. But my hands are tied Ray. I feel helpless.
I hope soon I will hold you in my arms again. I hope soon I can show you how much I love you my boy.
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.

Written text on screen: My mum passed away nine months ago. Her last words were: ‘Do not come back home for your own safety.’ I couldn’t go to her funeral because of the fear of prosecution.

Because of the constant stress, I had a break down and ended up in the Mental Health Hospital in Castlebar. For the first two weeks I didn’t leave my room. The nurses brought me food, but I couldn’t eat at all. I wasn’t able to talk to anyone yet. I found it difficult even to speak in my own language. I spent six weeks in the hospital where they treated me with
severe depression and psychotic episodes. They gave me a psychiatrist who tried desperately
to talk with me, but I just couldn’t express my feelings. One day something triggered in me. I
suddenly felt comfortable enough to talk. One of the nurses at the hospital told me, “You
can go back to Westport and hide there for the rest of your life, but you won’t be able to
develop your skills and integrate into this society.” Now I live in Ballyhaunis Hostel where I
am waiting for refugee status.


Filmography


*Der Fischmarkt und die Fische* (1968) Leonore Mau and Hubert Fichte. Germany. 9 mins.


*Strike* (1925) Sergei Eisenstein. Soviet Union. 82 mins.


*The Look of Silence* (2014) Joshua Oppenheimer. Final Cut for Real. Denmark, Finland, Indonesia,
Norway, UK. 99 mins.

*The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) Dziga Vertov. Soviet Union. 68 mins.

*Van Gogh* (1948) Alain Resnais. France. 19 mins.
