



Change will not happen unless people become aware of their own biases and their potential impact on behavior. It's by sharing our stories that we'll get to know each other, see our commonalities, understand each other's realities, and empathize with one another.

Cynthia Beaudry, Youth Network Coordinator, Canadian Council for Refugees.







# ***QUEER IS IN THE EYE OF THE NEWCOMER: IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND PLACE***

# 05

## **BELONGING**

Have you ever felt that someone had you sized up before they even knew you? That you could not share a part of yourself for fear of being ridiculed, bullied, or even attacked? What are the stereotypes or myths that circulate about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) refugees? LGBTQ youth? How does the media reinforce or counter these myths? Many of us have stories of feeling misunderstood or cast into a role that didn't fit. Participatory media projects offer a chance to counter stereotypes by permitting people to express themselves on their own terms.





# QUEER IS IN THE EYE OF THE NEWCOMER: MEDIA WORKSHOPS WITH EXPRESS

Liz Miller

## OVERVIEW

Over a two-year period, Mapping Memories collaborated with SOY Express, a Toronto based support group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth with refugee experiences. Our collaborations resulted in two media projects that explored the difficult process of leaving home, as well as the challenges of becoming established in a new place.

Our first project, *If Only I Knew*, involved two weekend workshops that resulted in a series of digital prints that were exhibited nationally. The second project was a collaboration with Express and Jane's Walk Toronto, which resulted in a walking tour and online tour called *Queer is in the Eye of the Newcomer*. These two projects used personal stories to address stereotypes of youth with refugee experiences and to foster a sense of belonging among the participants.



*Express is one of many programs offered by Supporting Our Youth (SOY), a program founded in 1991 to improve the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and transgender youth in Toronto. Express offers a supportive space for youth between the ages of 16 and 29 who are immigrants, newcomers to Canada, refugees, refugee claimants, and non-status queer and transgender youth. Most of the participants come from countries and/or cultures where it's not safe, legal, or easy to be LGBTQ or transgender so some of them are refugee claimants on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Express provides direct support to these youth in their application process as well as emotional support through weekly drop-in meetings. For more information, see [www.soytoronto.org](http://www.soytoronto.org).*

## WHAT IS A STEREOTYPE?

*A stereotype is a commonly held notion of a person or group based on an over simplification of behaviour or appearance. Stereotypes can be positive or negative, but they are often based on assumptions that all members of a group are the same.*

### EXPRESS

There were eight of us around the table. We were listening intently to Aamail Esmer describe his ambivalence about how he had to frame his experience as a queer refugee to the border official, to his lawyer, and to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada: "You have to say everything right to ensure that whomever is reading your Personal Identification Form (PIF) goes, yes this person should get refugee status. Obviously you have to say the truth but you have to put it in a way where you become the victim." Aamail continued, "Besides being gay, I am also Muslim, male, Pakistani, youth, student, son. But no matter who we are, we get labeled into boxes; you're this, you're that, you're what?"

Samantha Colombon then shared her arrival story and experience in dealing with a Canadian border official, who she identified as a Muslim and who she imagined would have discriminated against her if she had revealed her queer identity and her reasons for coming to Toronto. "In that moment, your life is in someone else's hands," Samantha explained, "they want to know everything about you, but you don't know who *they* are or what they think about you, and it makes you feel helpless." While

the group challenged Samantha on her assumption that all Muslims are homophobic, we understood her fear. We discussed the power imbalance in the interaction between a border official and an individual applying for asylum. Members of the group confirmed that harassment by airport officials around sexual orientation or gender identity was common. Samantha repeated, "in that moment, your life is in someone else's hands."

The youth around the table were active members of Express, a support group for newcomer LGBTQ youth that met on a weekly basis to resolve pressing concerns, such as finding a job, a house, or a lawyer. They returned each week, largely because of friendships and networks the group provided, and because of the safe space that the Coordinator Suhail AbualSameed, had created. What each individual had in common was the experience of being forced to leave their families, homes, and countries as a result of persecution based on sexual orientation.

### WORKSHOP GOALS

These weekend workshops were the result of a collaboration with Express and Mapping Memories, a participatory media research project for youth with refugee experience. In addition to the five youth participants, the workshop involved Express Coordinator Suhail AbualSameed, documentary maker Martha Stiegman, and myself (Liz Miller), also a documentary maker. Suhail did the recruitment and organized to hold the workshop at Sherbourne Health Centre, Toronto, where Express meets. He wanted the group to be diverse, so he selected new arrivals as well as individuals

who had been in Toronto for some time, who could share their hard-earned insights with the newcomers.

The purpose of our workshop was to create a safe space for dialogue, reflection, and creative work involving a variety of media. We wanted to provide an opportunity for participants like Aamail to creatively *reframe* their stories on *their own* terms and not simply as 'victims' seeking asylum. We hoped the work created would help build understanding within the general public and with decision makers dealing with refugee claimants persecuted because of their sexual orientation. Several participants were still in the process of applying as refugee claimants, so being involved in the workshops strengthened their cases as 'proof' that they were LGBTQ, which can sometimes be critical in asylum cases. At the same time, sharing their stories with a wider public led to important considerations, such as how much of their stories they wanted to share, whether there could be any negative repercussions, and who might need to hear these stories.

## WRITING EXERCISES

The initial workshop involved still photography and writing. The goal was for each participant to produce a montage with text and photographs for a final exhibit. On the first day, we shared examples of photo-montage, collage, and PhotoVoice (photo with text) projects with the participants. We used a quick-writing exercise to get started, asking the group to write about an object that they had brought with them on their journey to Canada. After writing for fifteen minutes, we gathered around the

table and shared excerpts. The exercise had opened up a wealth of stories about the conditions that had led to their quick departures and arduous journeys to Toronto. Difficult decisions, a lack of choice, being at a crossroads in life, and family relations were a few of the themes that emerged in our discussions. Samantha and another participant remarked that they had not brought many objects with them. "When you come to a new country you can not really bring a lot of stuff. You really

## WHAT IS GENDER IDENTITY?

**Gender Identity** is an individual's subjective sense of self as male, female (cis-gender), or trans-identified. **Sexual orientation** refers to emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions toward men, women, or both sexes. These attractions contribute to an individual's personal and social identity. **Queer** is often used as shorthand to refer to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and non-normative heterosexual individuals. The term queer often refers to an ambiguity of both sexual orientation and gender identity. The term is a re-appropriation of a put-down and is used frequently by Express group members to describe each other. For more information, visit the Positive Space Initiative at [www.positivespaces.ca](http://www.positivespaces.ca)

have one package and you bring your entire life in it—you have to leave everything and just come with your emotions. You have to move on," explained Samantha. As participants shared their writing samples and elaborated on their stories, the facilitators and other group members provided feedback on parts of their stories that resonated and could be further explored in moving the project forward.

## PHOTOGRAPHY



### Photo Scavenger Hunt Exercise

We then led a workshop in basic camera skills and composition followed by a photo scavenger hunt where students had twenty minutes to take ten specific photos. The scavenger hunt was an ideal complement to the intense writing exercises and allowed the group to practice camera techniques introduced in the workshop. At the end of the first day, each participant went home with a camera and the task to take photos that would illustrate the writing they had done at the beginning of the workshop.

The following day, participants brought in their photos and we reviewed them together as a group. Some students were inspired to do new writing based on their photographs; for others, the photos helped to reinforce and focus the writing process they had begun the day before.

We spent the second day drafting, sharing excerpts, and discussing ideas, so that by the end of the first weekend, everyone had the core idea for their montage that would be featured in the final exhibit. The participants had the following week to revise their writing and to take cameras home to further develop their work.

Samantha spent her week working on "My Cheshire Chest," a collage that evolved from the object writing exercise. In one image, Samantha depicted herself crouching and vulnerable, with her back to the camera. In another, she was reaching under her bed to retrieve a hidden box of personal treasures. Samantha's own handwriting is the third visual in this collage, and she

intentionally left words scratched out to communicate the messy process of self-representation.

Describing the vulnerable process she explained, "You discover that there are some things inside that you don't want to talk about because you feel ashamed. You don't know if anyone else will understand it" (Luchs & Miller 2008).



*My Cheshire chest, hiding emotions and lies from my life back there, with the cat protecting it. My great parody of the Cheshire Cat.*



## QUEERING A PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION FORM

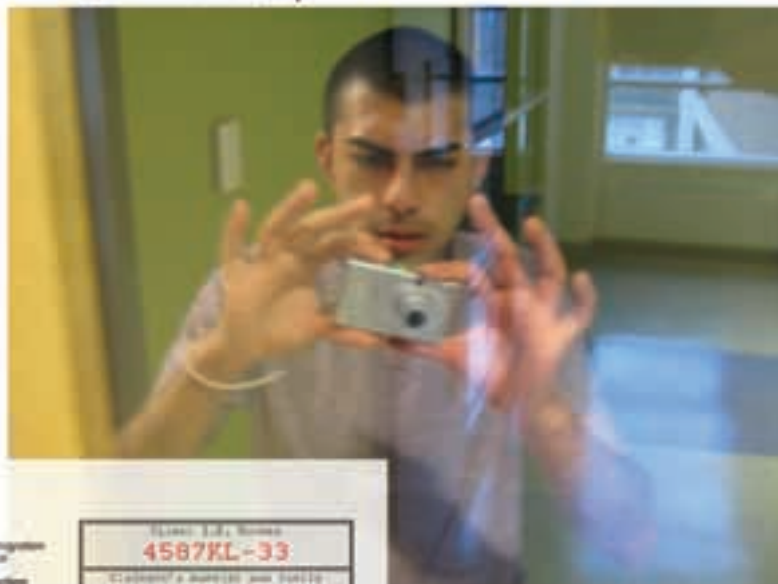
During the second weekend, we developed an exercise that was inspired by previous discussions about the challenges of seeking asylum as an LGBTQ refugee. Most participants felt misunderstood throughout the application process. The exercise was to transform the standard Personal Identification Form (PIF) that each of the participants had filled out upon entering the country. We asked participants to write up something they *wished* they could have shared in the PIF, something they felt they could not express during their application process. This could include personal information that was not solicited by their lawyer or immigration officer, such as artistic influences, personal memories, or even conflicting emotions.

Samantha wrote about resilience, personal contradictions, and the meaning of her name: "Samantha comes from the ancient language of Christ, Aramaic, which means the one who listens. It's true I always listen, even if sometimes I don't want to—it's my namesake." Suhail designed a template that resembled the original PIF, to which group members added their text along with a self-portrait. The exercise was a success, and so we decided to incorporate the adapted PIF forms into the final show as a companion piece to the photo-montages. On the last day of the workshop, we provided each participant with a blank 11"x17" sheet of paper on which they could do a layout of their photos and text. Using Photoshop, Suhail created a digital reproduction of each layout and the participants had a chance to make revisions and to consult with him on the final version.





Erasmus López V.



Immigration and  
Refugee Board  
Refugee Protection  
Division

Commission de l'immigration  
et du statut de réfugié  
Section de la protection  
des réfugiés

Class: I.R. / Classe:

4587KL-33

Classified / A classifié par 59412

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Erasmus Lopez V.

### Personal Information Form (PIF)

for persons claiming refugee protection in Canada

#### INSTRUCTIONS

##### Making your claim

The purpose of this form is to present your claim for refugee protection to the **Refugee Protection Division** of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). Under Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, refugee protection is given to a person who has been or is in need of protection. (The definitions of these at the end of these instructions under the heading Definitions. Claims of family members are to be presented together. Each member of the family completes a separate PIF.

##### You have 30 days to provide the PIF

You must provide the original and two (2) copies of the PIF to the IRB no later than 30 days after the date you received it. You may deliver the PIF in person or by mail to the IRB office indicated on the back of your Notice to Appear. You cannot mail the PIF to the IRB. If your claim is not accepted within 30 days, the IRB may decide that your claim is abandoned.

FORM 1000 (04/01) 1000 (04/01)

Refugee Protection Division

Revised / Révisé le 10/01/04

Print on light green paper in the space provided below. If you need more space, use separate sheets of paper (11.5 by 17 cm or 4 1/2 by 6 1/2 inches) stapled to one side only. Write your name and IRB file number at the top right-hand corner and the page number at the bottom right-hand corner of each additional sheet you use and attach them to this form.

I call myself Yara del Mar and I am a gay Mexican. I come to Canada on November 26th, 2006 leaving everything behind, having to abandon University, family, friends and not being able to bring anything with me but some clothes, my spirituality and what I consider to be my talents.

I've loved writing since I was a child, especially short stories and novels which reflect the way I feel at the moment. My writing is just a reflection of my spirit. The only thing I try to do is express a feeling and let other people identify themselves with it.

Revised / Révisé le 10/01/04  
Revised / Révisé le 10/01/04

Document not for sale / Document non vendu

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Canada

# Amail Esmer



Immigration and  
Refugee Board  
Refugee Protection  
Division

Commission de l'immigration  
et du statut de réfugié  
Section de la protection  
des réfugiés

Client I.D. Number <b>7676KI-44</b> Client's name and title <b>Amail Esmer</b>
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## Personal Information Form (PIF) for persons claiming refugee protection in Canada

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Form only (not the cover page)

Refugee Protection Division

Personal Information Form

Please type your answers in the space provided below. If you need more space, use separate sheets of paper (A4, 8 1/2 by 11 in or 21 by 27 cm), completed on one side only. Write your name and ID file number at the top right hand corner and the page number at the bottom right hand corner of each additional sheet you use and attach them to this form.

Who Am I? Well, where do I begin? Where do I end?

Guy, Muslim, Refugee, Male, Pakistani, Youth.

Where do I begin?

I am human, I am a student, I like to laugh, I love watching movies, being creative, hanging out with my friends, I miss my family but I stay connected to them, I want to travel, to meet diverse people, to write more, to read more, to love more, I want to be a professor or a politician or maybe both, I want to have fame, I want to influence positive changes in the world, I am a happy person, I smile a lot, I can be very sensitive, I have many friends, I would like to have children one day, I day dream a lot, I like to talk. Where do I end?

Refugee Protection Division (not shown)

Refugee ID file number



## LAUNCHING THE EXHIBIT *IF I ONLY KNEW*

Once the panels were printed, Suhail installed the finished work at Toronto City Hall on World Refugee Day. The show, entitled *If I Only Knew*, marked one of the first times that sexual orientation issues were brought into the spotlight at a refugee forum like this one in Toronto. The show was covered by the media and seen by employees of settlement agencies, members of faith-based groups, public officials, and city workers. Erasmo López V., one of the youth

participants who presented at the event, was energized by the positive response: "I had the opportunity to talk about the exhibition and to talk in the City Hall to over 100 people – they could see what is in our hearts and our lives" (Stiegman 2008).

Following the City Hall exhibit, the work was installed in the Sherbourne Health Centre, Toronto, for a month, and then traveled to various events sponsored by diverse LGBTQ organizations in Toronto and throughout Canada. The response to the work was enthusiastic, and the youth were awarded the prestigious Youth Line Award for their "unique contributions to fostering community."

## REFLECTIONS

The success of the workshop and the *If I Only Knew* exhibit was largely due to Express Coordinator Suhail's investment in the project. He was involved in the planning, the production and design, and



Erasmo López V. presents at Toronto City Hall



*If I Only Knew* exhibit at UQAM, Montreal

## El nuevo amanecer The new land

Dejo el barco que me trajo  
I get off the boat that brought  
de algún lugar a la tierra  
me from somewhere else  
prometida. Puedo ver  
to this promised land.  
un nuevo amanecer que trae  
I can see a new dawn, which  
consigo nuevas esperanzas y  
brings with it new hopes and  
nuevas ilusiones. El  
dreams. The sun  
sol caliente mi cuerpo lle-  
warms up my body reach-  
gando hasta mi corazón y  
my heart and making it grow  
haciendo florecer en él  
in the radiant flower  
la flor radiante de una  
of a new spring.  
nueva primavera.



*If I Only Knew* photo montage by Erasmo López V.



# CAUTION:



## BORDER CROSSING

**CAUTION:** One step

into the cold  
leaving behind old  
taking in new  
but only a few  
friends, families, communities  
memories, lovers, nationalities  
labels, lives, identities

**CAUTION:** just One step

If only I had known  
eventually, time has shown  
take back, I can not  
this moment, I had sought  
lonely, it can be  
lonely to be Me

**CAUTION:** only One step

this freedom is not free  
and maybe you will see  
what was, what is  
and what will become  
of You...  
Here.

**" WELCOME "**

*If I Only Knew* photo montage by Aamail Esmer

## WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT APPLYING AS A "GAY" REFUGEE CLAIMANT?

Providing evidence is one of the most challenging aspects of the application process because members of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada receive little or no sensitivity training in handling LGBTQ refugee claimants. In addition to 'proving' that they have been a target of violence, claimants also have to prove their sexual orientation. They are expected to act out stereotypes or behave in a way that can be immediately understood as 'gay' by the individual judging the case.

For example, experienced immigration lawyers advise clients to 'dress for the occasion' as refugee board members have been known to say things like, "But you don't look gay, how can you prove it?" This suggestion is based on assumptions about how a LGBTQ person might dress or behave and does not take into account cultural differences. Furthermore, providing an official with the outfit or attitude that he or she is expecting is complicated for those individuals who have spent years hiding their gay identity for fear of persecution.

Further anxiety and misunderstanding can be reinforced by cultural and language barriers or by a homophobic lawyer or translator. One very practical bit of advice that Express coordinator Suhail offers to his youth group is to be careful of burning bridges with past lovers, given that claimants are also expected to provide proof of sexual activity through photos or letters that show an intimate relationship with someone of the same sex.

While it is problematic to reduce identity politics to sexual practices, it is also humiliating for many individuals, grappling with shame and fear connected to their sexual orientation. The Express group offers an invaluable space for them to share experiences and exchange advice in preparation for their hearings. By providing a final certificate for taking part in the media workshops, we could also offer claimants an additional means of 'proving' their gay identity.

the critical stage of disseminating the finished work (see Chapter 5). The trust established between the participants was an extension of the ongoing intimacy he cultivated with his support group. Suhail was enthusiastic about the process and explained that the smaller size of the Mapping Memories workshops had provided an opportunity for participants to deal with more intimate issues together. The workshop also presented an opportunity for Suhail and his group to temporarily shift gears from direct service work to advocacy. The process and the exhibitions offered the participants a chance to explore how they could frame or re-frame their experiences to the general public. As participant Omar explained, "It was a chance to communicate it differently than I have been doing for the past five years. You go to a conference, you talk about 'I am a refugee' – it is the

same story, people have heard it, 'I am the victim.' This was different. In this I was saying, 'this is me, this is how I feel about certain things.' I don't have to justify why I feel these things and I am doing it in a more creative way ...it's a poem and you can take whatever you want from it" (Luchs & Miller 2008).

Omar's reflection spoke to a tension that he, Samantha, and the other participants had been facing. They wanted to be able to process difficult experiences and to share their stories with a larger audience, but they also wanted to get beyond the narrative that essentialized them as 'gay refugees' or 'victims.' In her PIF, Samantha asserted this desire to be understood as a resilient individual by writing, "I know I am strong because I am still here. I have struggled a lot to become what I am."

*In this I was saying, 'this is me, this is how I feel about certain things.' I don't have to justify why I feel these things and I am doing it in a more creative way ...it's a poem and you can take whatever you want from it.*

Amail Esmer

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## A WALKING TOUR

Based on the success of our first project, Mapping Memories and Express were eager to collaborate again and this time to incorporate some of the place-based media methods (like DIY cartography) that we were exploring with other Mapping Memories projects. Express had initiated a new collaboration with Jane's Walk Toronto, a group that works with volunteers to lead guided walking tours of their neighborhoods. The walking tours are a tribute to and a continuation of the work that urban geographer Jane Jacobs spearheaded to make cities walkable and to ensure citizen involvement in urban planning. Jane's Walk tours bring people together people who are passionate about their neighborhoods to discuss the culture, history,

and contemporary politics of neighborhoods and to get involved in local initiatives.

Jane's Walk had 70 walks planned for Toronto during 2009, and for the first time the organization wanted to ensure the involvement of youth as guides. On a Jane's Walk, a street corner or a café holds as much significance as an official monument or park and the unique aspect of this particular walk would be the group's perspective on a well-known area, the Church Wellesley Village. This tour would be different from previous 'gay history tours' by emphasizing that refugees and people of color have a different experience of the neighborhood.



## PLACE-BASED STORIES

“Place, home and ‘roots’ are a fundamental human need and they shape our cultural identity” (Butler 2001, 366).

Facilitator Jeb Kilbourn met with four Express participants three times over one month to plan the walking tour they called *Queer is in the Eye of the Newcomer*. Jeb began by asking questions, including: What are some important meeting spaces in your neighborhood? What spaces are you most proud of? Where do you feel most comfortable? Where do you not feel safe and why? The guides chose five places that were important to them in the neighborhood where Express is located. Each guide developed a story for each of the locations.

Some of the guides made comparisons between this Toronto neighborhood and the places that they came from. For example, one participant discussed the lack of open spaces for gay youth in his home country of Azerbaijan: “Back home we don’t have a gay village or even a gay bar, we just have one LGBTQ organization that I used to volunteer with, but you have to keep it secret” (Miller 2008). The skillful way in which the youth made comparisons between the cultures they had left and the cultures they were encountering were of interest to the audience on the tour, and it was also a means for the group members to reflect on their own relocations.



Images from *Queer is in the Eye of the Newcomer* walk



# QUEER IS IN THE EYE OF THE NEWCOMER

**01** The Sherbourne Health Centre is where the Express group meets each week. Here, the guides introduced themselves and shared their first impressions of Express. The guides contrasted the rather dull appearance of the health centre with the dynamic interactions that take place inside. One guide had everyone laughing as he shared his expectation that a drag queen would be greeting newcomers at the door.



**02** "The Goodbye Corner" is where Express members part each week after the support group. Here, the group shared their personal goodbye stories—the circumstances that had forced them to leave their home countries often without proper goodbyes.



**03** The Food Court is where participants meet after the official support group to discuss personal issues and swap practical advice, such as how to get an additional ID card to avoid being recognized as a refugee. The ID refugees receive upon entry is not the card they want to use to get into a bar. Love, sex, and whether to get involved with other support group members are the most common topics worked out over meals at the Food Court.





**04** Buddies in Bad Times Theatre is a queer theatre venue that offers an open mic night for new talent. Here visitors on the walking tour were treated to a live singing performance by one of the tour guides. Having sung professionally in his home country, one guide explained how important the theatre had been for him as he struggled to find his way in a new place.



**05** The walking tour ended on Church Street, the centre of one of Toronto's largest LGBTQ neighborhoods. Here the guides shared their first impressions of the area, from their favorite bars to candid descriptions of feeling objectification and discrimination as a result of their race or ethnicity. The guides discussed the challenges they had experienced in finding safe meeting places for queer groups in their own countries.

## WHO IS JANE JACOBS AND WHAT IS A JANE'S WALK?

Jane Jacobs, born in 1916, was a writer and community activist. She is best known for her work, **The Death and Life of Great American Cities** (1961). Jacobs was born in the United States but after moving to Canada in 1968, she focused most of her projects on Canadian cities. She criticized many urban renewal politics and projects across North America that she felt would disrupt the flow and spirit of neighbourhoods, including the construction of super highways. In addition to writing, she was involved in grassroots organizing against development projects that were out of sync with the needs of neighborhoods. For more information, see [www.janeswalk.net](http://www.janeswalk.net)



## MAPPING THE WALK ONLINE

Mapping Memories helped the guides to create an online version of the walk. The idea was to broaden the reach of the project, motivate others to get involved, and to explore how mapping a story online could contribute to the actual walk. To do this, we filmed the stories the day before the walk and again on the day of the actual tour. Suhail and Jeb had established trust and cohesion within the group, which made our contribution possible.

We explored two online platforms to map the Jane's Walk stories. Our first approach was to connect the video clips to the actual geographic coordinates of the stops on the walk using Google Maps. Our website was created with Drupal, an open-source content management system that permits us to embed Google Maps for each of our projects. We compressed the 25 short video clips

(five stories per site) and uploaded them onto a free online video player, Blip, and embedded these in the maps. By mapping the stops on the walk in this way, web users would have a bird's-eye view of the locations on the walk and the larger neighbourhood, and they could then visit the stops whenever they liked without necessarily following the same route as the tour.

## MAPPING USING THE KORSAKOW SYSTEM

Our second approach to mapping was to organize the narratives based on theme and storyteller. We did this using the Korsakow System, a free open-source software application for creating "database narratives." We organized the short clips, decided on themes, and created our first database narrative. The online Korsakow tutorials and manual helped us through the technical process ([korsakow.org](http://korsakow.org)).

**The Korsakow System** is the invention of Florian Thalhofer, a Berlin-based artist and filmmaker, who developed it as a free download with the support and assistance of CINER-G, a Concordia University research group on interactive narrative experimentation. This form of storytelling permits the user or viewer to determine the path of the narrative, based on certain characters or themes such as "dating advice" or "two lives." So a visitor to the site might decide to follow one person's story, or to navigate by following a provocative theme. The idea is that while you are watching one clip, icons for other related clips appear on the screen, and from these you select your next step. This type of 'mapping' allows for some degree of interactivity and decision-making on the part of the user.



## VIRTUAL TOURS AND ACTUAL WALKS

The virtual walk and the actual walk worked as complementary counterpoints. During the live walk, stories came together as a single narrative and the group dynamic was reinforced. The walk also provided the guides with immediate affirmation from the crowd, which helped them to understand how their stories could touch others and make a difference.

Filming the guides the day before the walk offered a chance for the group to rehearse. Just like a theatre performance, the group gained more control over their stories with each take, and rehearsing the stories fostered the necessary confidence in them to allow for spontaneity and interaction. Once recorded, the stories could exist independently of the storytellers, who are freed from the obligation to repeat their stories over and over again.

### A PUBLIC LAUNCH

Once the stories were mapped, we invited the Toronto youth guides to Montreal to launch the online tour and share the experience at an event organized by Ethnoculture, a group that brings together queer minorities in Montreal ([www.ethnoculture.org](http://www.ethnoculture.org)). This provided an opportunity to re-confirm that we had everyone's consent about putting the work onto the Internet, and it was an occasion to check in with the participants.

We wanted to share the project with youth and queer groups in Montreal in the hopes that it would motivate them to organize their own walks. The event provided a meaningful way to reflect on the experience of



*Once I saw myself in the neighborhood talking about my stories and how they relate to being gay in Toronto, I realized I am making myself included in this gay community in Toronto. So having this project was a great way for me to see how I could fit into this new society.*

”

Felipe, workshop participant



both the walk and the mapping project. As participant Gabe explained, "Taking part in this project was amazing. I have never been out and this project brought me out. I am shy, but I realized I could do something with the voice I have inside. I am gay, but I can make a difference. I can help people who are there without support. We want to see if the people of Montreal would like to build from something we are doing. We are trying to see if we can get youth involved" (Stiegman 2009).

For Gabe, the experience was an opportunity to come out not simply as a gay man but as a leader, ready to engage and involve others. The video component of the mapping project served as a mirror and provided an opportunity for the participants to further consider their place in the community. Ralph shared his impressions as well, "Once I saw myself in the neighborhood talking about my stories and how they relate to being gay in Toronto, I realized I am making myself included in this gay community in Toronto. So having this project was a great way for me to see how I could fit into this new society" (Stiegman 2009).

## PROTECTING IDENTITY

Translating *Queer is in the Eye of the Newcomer* to a web project involved challenging negotiations. A significant difference between the two walks was that, since the online walk was not limited to a local audience, there were risks associated with engagement with a larger, unknown, global audience. We discussed the possible negative ramifications before filming, and again before uploading the content online. The video advocacy group, Witness,

emphasizes in their work with human rights activists that if media is circulated, especially via the Internet, then it should be assumed that an oppressor or an opponent *would* see it. We discussed this with the participants and emphasized that the circulation of media is unpredictable and out of our control.

One of the tour guides wanted to be involved, but was worried about exposing his identity on the Internet. Specifically, he did not want his father to see the video and discover his whereabouts; neither did he want his first video representation to be an obscured record of self, since he had already lived with so much secrecy.

As a result, we shot the video without using any techniques to hide his identity. Instead, we found a way to protect his identity in the editing room by adding a soft blur to his face, a technique that could be removed at a later date. The experience shed light on the need to pay careful attention to the circumstances of each individual. It also illustrated the tension between a media device that captures a moment in time, and the negotiation of identity, which is always in flux.

A year later, this same tour guide was asked to become a Jane's Walk employee, facilitating a second walk along with a new Express group. His role had evolved from a participant to a facilitator and the video project played a role in helping him to crystallize how his story could inspire others in similar circumstances.

The video still has a soft blur effect added, but his role as a mentor and organizer had evolved nonetheless. It was critical that he understood



his options for disclosing his identity online, so that he could carefully weigh the balance between inspiring others and the need to protect himself. This situation also reinforced my belief that individuals need time to resolve complex issues regarding consent and what it means to take a story public. Making time to sort things out is vital, especially when working with youth.

## IMPACT

In describing collaborative endeavors, oral historian Michael Frisch advises, “a commitment to sharing authority is a beginning, not a destination. There are no easy answers or formulas and no simple lessons” (Frisch 2003, 111). These challenges are true in both the production and distribution of participatory projects.

A motivation for most of the Express participants was to ‘give back.’ They were grateful for the support they had received at Express, and hoped that by sharing their stories, they might help the next newcomers in the difficult process of finding their way in a new place. The participants wanted to use their work to let newcomers know that they were not alone.

The group at Express also wanted their stories to reach refugee board members who are dealing with queer refugee claims. They hoped that through the diversity of their stories, these board members could better understand the complexity of proving both sexual orientation as well as the specific circumstance of persecution. As a group we often asked ourselves, “What would a refugee board member need to understand before they make decisions regarding

queer refugee claimants?” This was important because at the time there was no mandatory training on sexual orientation or gender identity for these decision makers. Similarly, it became clear that there was a need for more sensitivity training in the areas of legal aide, health care, and mental health counseling.

*AGIR (Action Gay, Lesbienne, Bisexuelle, Trans et Queer pour Immigrants et Réfugiés) is a network of refugees, immigrants, activists, and service providers who offer resources and advocacy for LGBTQ and newcomers in Montreal. Four of the finished films produced in this workshop can be found on the DVD.*

Another key impact of the collaboration with Express materialized one year after the SOY workshop. Inspired by the Express project, AGIR, Action for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Immigrants and Refugees, invited Mapping Memories to lead a four-week intensive digital storytelling workshop for 13 individuals from Africa, the Caribbean, and Central/South America.

The resulting stories were screened at Image+Nation, Montreal’s LGBTQ film festival, and remain in circulation at events throughout the city. The youth in Toronto had hoped that their stories would inspire others and they did; the work of making their stories public was an important and courageous first step.



# IT'S ALL CONNECTED

Cynthia Beaudry, Canadian Council  
for Refugees Youth Coordinator

Refugee and immigrant youth in Canada often face stereotypes, prejudice, misconceptions, and racism, which can lead them to feel isolated, alienated, and hopeless. For example, many newcomer youth feel as though they are being perceived as gang members or criminals because of their clothing style or skin color. Some feel they are seen as job-thieves, burdens on the welfare system, 'illegal immigrants,' or 'queue jumpers' instead of workers contributing to Canada's economy. Often they feel they are perceived as stupid or illiterate because of language barriers or they are suspected as 'terrorists' because of their religion. LGBTQ newcomers are sometimes assumed to be heterosexual because of the myth that people of color can't be LGBTQ.

We all absorb implicit biases and stereotypes, and these have real impacts on how we perceive others: who we think we can trust, who we think belongs, who we think is normal, and who we think isn't. But this is just a part of the equation. Myths, stereotypes, misconceptions, prejudices, implicit bias, and racism are not just about misinformation but are also part of larger societal problems. If we want diversity in our society, we have to address racism at the implicit and emotional level in addition to the formal structural and policy level.

If we don't make a conscious effort to be aware of our implicit biases, they may influence how we interact with others, affecting not only who we choose as our friends, but also who we want as our employees, tenants, roommates, doctors, and politicians. We are all affected by individual and systemic racism, but most importantly, we also have the power to change systems and ourselves.

What creates change in people is not necessarily factual information, but interaction with the 'other.' It's by talking to each other that we'll get to know each other, see our commonalities, understand each other's realities, and sympathize with one another. We need to create spaces and initiatives for interaction.

## LEARN MORE

Debunking Myths about Newcomer Youth  
[www.ccrweb.ca/en/debunkingmyths/frontpage](http://www.ccrweb.ca/en/debunkingmyths/frontpage)

Speak Up! Support Newcomer  
Youth Voices in Canada  
[www.ccrweb.ca/en/youth/youth-network](http://www.ccrweb.ca/en/youth/youth-network)



# WEEKEND MEDIA WORKSHOP

## WEEKEND ONE: QUICK WRITES AND STILL PHOTOGRAPHY

### Tool box:

Pens, 11"x17" paper, digital still cameras, laptop, projector, screen, USB keys, card reader.

### Level of difficulty:

Beginner

### Time:

Weekend workshop



PowerPoint on  
Composition

- » Review PhotoVoice projects and photo-montages to introduce the project.
- » Explore a shared goal, determine target audience, and review informed consent.
- » Explain that each participant will have two 11"x17" panels for a final show.
- » Conduct quick-writes lasting fifteen minutes:
  - » Describe an object you brought with you or left behind.
  - » If you could write a letter to someone back home, how would you describe your biggest challenge since arriving? Your biggest success?
- » Participants share writing excerpts with the group.
- » Present PowerPoint on Composition. Introduce cameras, and send participants on a photo scavenger hunt to practice their photography skills.
- » Participants take cameras home overnight, then come back and review photos together.

## WEEKEND TWO: LAYOUT

- » Participants begin with a writing exercise about what makes them unique. They write something that would not fit in a standard Personal Identification Form (PIF), the form that all refugees must complete in their application process to document their family and employment history.
- » Each student takes a self portrait to accompany their PIF re-creation.
- » Participants lay out their text and photos onto a blank 11"x17" piece of paper. If they want to use their own handwriting, have them write in black on a white card so it can be scanned digitally.
- » Revisit consent and offer a space for participants to evaluate the workshop.

## WORKSHOP DOCUMENTATION

- » Take photographs of each exhibition. Conduct video interviews with participants about their finished work. Have visitors to the exhibition write their impressions.

# RELATED ACTIVITIES

## PHOTO SCAVENGER HUNT

Explore your neighbourhood in a new way. Work in pairs, ideally with someone you do not know very well. Choose five ideas for photographs from a list. If possible, map your journey and mark the location of each 'discovery' on the map (you can draw the map yourself or print one from Google Maps). On the reverse side of the map, create a caption for each photo. Don't be overly concerned about the appearance of the map; it will simply be used as a tool for you to remember and convey elements of your adventure to others. Do not take photographs of people you don't know, unless they are part of a crowd or street scene.



Scavenger Hunt  
Exercise

## MAKE YOUR OWN COLLAGE

Samantha made a collage from photographs and text as a form of self-expression. Select your own materials and make a collage about yourself. You can use old photos, new photos you have taken, text, or clips from magazines or newspapers. Lay everything out on a piece of paper and glue it together or create a digital collage using Photoshop.

For inspiration, visit [www.i-live-here.com](http://www.i-live-here.com) or [www.sabrinawardharrison.com](http://www.sabrinawardharrison.com).

## ORGANIZE A NEIGHBOURHOOD WALK

- » Set a goal of what you hope to achieve by organizing the walk.
- » Come up with stories. Memories, collective or individual, are a good starting point or you can research local stories. Walk around the neighbourhood for inspiration.
- » Plan your route by photocopying a map of the neighbourhood. Use the stories, places, and people that you want to talk about as landmarks. Select six to ten stops, keeping the walk under two hours.
- » Involve more than one guide and consider integrating a song or creative activity into the walk to liven things up.
- » Figure out where your tour will end and limit the tour to one and a half hours so that participants can continue conversations afterwards.
- » Rehearse in advance and practice speaking loudly. You might consider renting a small microphone/amplifier unit.
- » If there are stairs near your tour stops, use them to help to create an 'amphitheatre' style presentation.
- » Engage with your audience on the walk. It's important to balance talking, walking, and conversation. Too much of any one activity can be tiring.

For more information on how to lead a walk visit, [www.janeswalk.net](http://www.janeswalk.net)



## CLAIMING SPACES

Take an image of a place that represents the highest amount of social power in Canada. You might take an image of a bank, a corporate building, a government building, an academic institution, a hotel, a wealthy home – be creative. Think about and observe the characteristics of the people who live or work there. Next, take an image with you in or around that place. How will you place yourself next to this power? Are you inside or outside? What mood will you evoke? Humour? Anger? Irreverence? We tend to be more conscious of the oppressions or barriers we face or the things we don't have, rather than how we too are part of power structures. With this in mind, write a caption to go along with that photo that considers what you have in common with someone who lives or works there.

To expand this activity, take a photo that represents each form of power:

- » **Personal Power** – often derived from charisma, self-confidence, self-respect, networks of support, and individual characteristics that we and others value.
- » **Institutional/Organizational Power** – derived from our position, mandate, resources, longevity, or seniority in a group.
- » **Collective Power** – can be used to organize against institutional and organizational power. Building Collective Power means learning to be an ally. An ally is someone who advocates for and supports members of a community other than their own, reaching across differences to achieve mutual goals.
- » **Social Power** – power derived from aspects of our social identity such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc.

*Exercise adapted from Canada World Youth Anti-Oppression Training, 2010.*

## SHARING YOUR STORIES

Many of the tour guides for the *Queer is in the Eye of the Newcomer* walk compared meeting spaces in Toronto with meeting places for LGBTQ in their countries of origin. Where do you meet with your friends? Write about where you would look for new friends if you moved to a new neighbourhood, city, or country. Some of the guides talked about how certain places in the neighbourhood were welcoming, but also how other places made them feel uncomfortable. Describe places in your neighbourhood where you feel accepted. What about places where you feel nervous, objectified, or alienated?

## WRITING EXERCISES

Do a quick-write (ten minutes) about one of the circumstances below that you identify with and one that you don't. Include details such as where you were, who you were with, what you heard, and what you felt.

- » A time you were embarrassed or ashamed of your clothes, your house, or your family when growing up.
- » A time you started school where the language spoken was not your mother tongue.
- » A time you were ridiculed because of your race, ethnic background, or class background.
- » A time you were given less support than others in your family to pursue goals because of your gender identity.
- » A time you were hassled by the police because of your race or gender.
- » If you rarely see people of your gender, race or ethnicity in positions of power and leadership in government, mainstream social justice movements, and business.
- » If you commonly see people of your race or ethnicity on TV or in the movies in roles that you consider degrading.
- » A time your opinion was disregarded in the last six months, because of your race or gender.
- » A time you were worried about introducing a friend or partner to family or friends because of his or her sexual orientation.

Now do a quick write about:

- » A time you spoke up to defend the rights of someone who was not from your own racial or ethnic background.
- » A time you attended a cultural event that was not of your culture.
- » A time you inquired about or listened empathetically to a story of immigration, gender or racial harassment, or homophobia.
- » A hero that is not of your own ethnic or racial background.

Exercise adapted from Canada World Youth Anti-Oppression Training, 2010.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- » How will you recruit your participants?
- » Do they know each other? And if the group is meeting for the first time, how will you build trust within the group? How will you create a safe space?
- » Who is the target audience for the finished work? What do you want them to gain from the work?
- » Does your work involve confronting stereotypes? If so, how can you avoid reinforcing stereotypes or sending negative messages in contexts where the myths are not typically heard?
- » Are you able to draw connections between stereotypes and larger forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, xenophobia, exclusion, or fear of the other?

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Advances in technology have led to both a democratization of cartographic practice and what might be considered a mapping renaissance. In their resource, "Maps for Advocacy," the Tactical Technology Collective explains how maps help represent links between places, events, and facts, and work to visualize communities. For more information see, [www.tacticaltech.org/mapsforadvocacy](http://www.tacticaltech.org/mapsforadvocacy)



