

Representing in Digital Space

Camille Turner

I am a digital artist living in Toronto, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in Canada, and indeed on the planet, yet I never met any other black new media artists until 2001 when I attended a conference called “Race in Digital Space” at MIT in Boston. One of the presenters was Mervin Jarman, a fellow Jamaican new media practitioner. He and Richard Pierre-Davis, from Trinidad, represented the UK-based (h)activist collective, Mongrel. Their presence at the conference affirmed for me that there was a place for me in the digital world. In stark contrast to the academic presentations, they were down-to-earth. They were passionate. They spoke the language of the streets. Drawing from their backgrounds and personal experiences they connected with communities outside the digital mainstream all over the world. I was inspired.

Returning to Toronto, I was determined to make a difference, to not only find my voice using digital media but to create a point of access for other marginalized people to represent themselves. Generous funding from the Canada Council for the Arts allowed me to embark on a year-long curatorial residency at InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Gallery. The gallery’s support enabled me to develop partnerships with community-based organizations and practitioners that I have continued to work with over the years.

Through my collaborations I’ve experienced a range of community-based media. The first partnership was with Regent Park Focus where Adonis Huggins directed a youth Media Arts Program. Located in Regent Park, Canada’s oldest and largest social housing community, this program includes a recording studio, a film course, a radio show, and a community newspaper written, edited and distributed by the youth. We invited Mervin to come to Toronto to facilitate a workshop in which the Focus youth learned to create their own interactive media projects using Linker, a software developed by Mongrel, that anyone with a little knowledge of computers can use. Assisting Mervin helped me to learn how to facilitate community media art workshops and how to work with youth. Mervin’s philosophy was to start with the glass half full, leaving room for the group’s input.

Mervin invited me to participate as a workshop leader during the boot-up of the Container. I left Jamaica for Canada as a child, so I

experienced teaching at the Container as a joyful homecoming. I was welcomed into the community and have since returned to teach more workshops. It’s been an ongoing, rich cultural exchange, an insider’s view of Jamaica few are privileged to experience. Colleagues from other countries who have visited tell me they received far more than they gave and I encourage practitioners to take part in a Container residency.



Camille Turner and Jennifer LaFontaine opening the screening of the Digital Storytelling Workshop movies. Image courtesy mervin Jarman.

Another important community partnership that has continued over the years is with Central Neighbourhood House (CNH), a social agency located in downtown east Toronto next to Regent Park. I joined forces with Jennifer LaFontaine, head of the CNH’s Women’s program. My first contribution was to add a digital media component to a photography program she had started years before. InterAccess hosted an exhibition of the resulting work. We had pot-luck feasts, mini-digital media workshops and other participatory activities right in the gallery space during the exhibition. We invited several community groups representing a variety of cultures and interests to participate. Continuing the work I started during that pivotal year, I’m now completing a three-year artistic residency with CNH funded through Ontario Arts Council, Toronto Arts Council and several other funding organizations.

A few years ago we came across The Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS), an organization based in California that developed a process for enabling anyone, with little or no computer experience, to use digital

media to create their own 3-5 minute videos. Participants use personal photographs, artwork, mementos, text, sound and their own voice to tell their stories. Jennifer and I took a Digital Storytelling course from CDS and with their support we used their curriculum as the basis for developing our own program. We have mainly worked with immigrant and refugee women from a variety of cultures. More recently, we started programs for deaf women and girls.

Our work involves creating a supportive environment to allow participants to feel safe enough to share their stories. As I do this work I have witnessed Story Circles in which stories urgently bubble up, from grief, sorrow, pain, and joy, demanding to be told. Some stories have never been told before. Some have finally found a place where they are acknowledged and valued for the first time.

We shift and change our programs in response to the needs of the various groups we work with. For example, a voice-over track is usually the most important element of the story. When working with deaf women, we substitute a subtitle track and give them the option of video-taping themselves signing instead of just using still images. With participants whose language is not English, they also have the option of recording a voice-over track in their language with English subtitles.

Over the years we have worked steadily to achieve our dream of creating a community media lab at CNH. Because of the diversity of languages and cultures in the communities we work in, we've created a peer-facilitator program in which we train women from our programs to become part of our teaching team. This enables us to deliver Digital Storytelling programs to a variety of communities in various languages.

A lab can be put together for very little money. What is mainly needed along, with the rudimentary equipment, is determination and flexibility. We started our program by borrowing computers and equipment from friends and neighbouring agencies. When we secured funding, we purchased a simple 4 channel mixer for about \$150 and a SHURE condenser microphone for about \$100 (all prices in Canadian currency). These are essential tools to ensure a good quality voiceover—the backbone of the digital stories. We use Audacity, a free program we downloaded from the web, for mixing sound and we purchased Adobe Photoshop and Premiere Elements, which together cost \$150, for photo and video editing.

As an artist working with communities, this long-term project has been very fulfilling because I have been able to see the fruits of my labour. I am now working towards the sustainability of the program. We've come a long way since our beginning. We now have a fleet of 7

PC laptops and trained multi-lingual peer facilitators delivering the program in Tamil, Somali, Bengali, Mandarin, Spanish and American Sign Language (ASL). One of my deepest hopes is that the community will take ownership of the work and will continue to use technological tools to tell their stories and represent themselves in the digital world.

Links

Regent Park Focus

<www.catchdaflava.com>

Center for Digital Storytelling

<www.storycenter.org>

Digital Story Methodology

<www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/techplan/page5897.cfm>

The Story Project collaboration between CNH and InterAccess

<www.thestoryproject.ca>

Blog by Camille Turner of her experiences at the Container Project

<www.year01.com/containerproject/blog.html>

CNH Digital Stories

<www.thestoryproject.ca/digitalstories.html>

Linker

<linker.mongrel.org.uk>