

Urban Villages: The Roma's Digital Scrapbooks—Changing Narratives One Image at a Time

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Creative Activism Volume:

Urban Villages: The Roma's Digital Scrapbooks- Changing narratives one image at a time

By: Dr. Rosemary (Rosa) Cisneros

Creative activism is a tool used to transmit a message and is dependent on creativity and innovation. Digital technologies have allowed individuals to have a visual presence and broaden the reach of the information being communicated. Artistic practices that are geared towards social and political changes and that are not purely about affect but created with an intention to effect, fall under the creative activism umbrella. As part of the Coventry University Collaborative Research and Outreach Projects partnered with the University of Warwick partnership scheme¹, *Urban Villages: the Roma's Digital Scrapbook* (2020) brought together Roma and non-Roma to co-create a short film and a digital scrapbook exhibition that focuses on the experiences, identity and voices of the Roma people, told by the Roma people who live in the city of Coventry, UK. The film was shared with relevant stakeholders and the wider community to foster closer links and challenge stereotypes.

Digital technologies are changing the way that people receive, engage and consume materials and information. Particularly now during the COVID-19 Pandemic, the project team's ability to gather Roma families, artists, cultural heritage institutions and a local charity to make one medium-length documentary that captures the Growing Project² and the voices of the Roma community, with a focus on the Roma women and youth, was timely. The online workshops and discussions were led by the research team and the film was facilitated by Raluca Maria Polodeanu from Reel Master Productions. The project broadly consisted of working closely with local Roma families and artists and gaining a better understanding of their identity and experience of living, working and studying in Coventry. Several online discussions and socially distanced recordings took place to enable the Roma people to share their voices and create and curate digital content for the production of a short film documenting their experiences and expressing their identity. This film and photographic digital scrapbooks were presented at a sharing event hosted by the Belgrade Theatre located in Coventry, UK.

Writing from the perspective of a Roma woman, artist and researcher, who was born into a grassroots community, allows me to write from an insider's perspective. It is important to situate myself within this writing as I have an innate understanding of the need to document and write this chapter and aim to bring

¹ The project included two researchers, Dr Heidi Ashton from Warwick University and Dr Rosemary (Rosa) Cisneros from Coventry University. They were equally responsible for the delivery of the project.

² The Growing Project: <http://www.theromaproject.org/blog/>

forward the voices from the grassroots community. This paper will contextualise the work from two academics working in UK-based universities who chose to collaborate with Romanian Roma families living in Coventry. This chapter will document the process of co-creation and highlight its impact and make a claim that the cultural intelligence of all subjects within the research project can be incorporated in research design and outputs, through the use of dialogical knowledge³ which is instigated through the use of Communicative Methodology (CM). Using qualitative and quantitative research methods the team gained data as to what impact the project had on those involved. Particularly, qualitative interviews offered insight into the community's values and the filming sessions reveal emotional connections between the filmmaker and the subjects and environments, and the on-screen interviews elicit personal testimonies and connections with the other community members and their families.

This chapter focuses on the current historic moment, which is framed within the COVID-19 Pandemic, and reflects on a socially and politically tense intersection where arts and digital tools are serving as an entry point to discuss highly charged topics. The Roma community is Europe's largest ethnic minority, with an estimate of 10 to 12 million Roma⁴. The socio-historic reality of the Roma, is one that is tense and wrought with images which sees the community as beggars, criminals and traditional stereotypes and racialized misconceptions of Roma women dominate popular discourse. Accurate narratives of the Roma community are not circulated widely and the plural voices and personal experiences are often tucked away and masked by erroneous images and misinformation. Aidan McGarry in his book *Romaphobia*⁵ uncovers causes of racism towards Roma and Radmila Mladenova⁶ says that *Anti-Gypsyism* is a state of normality, both on and off the big screen. She pontificates that there is a need to examine and expose "Anti-Gypsyism for its pathology, for its dehumanising violence and for the crippling effect it has on minorities and national majorities alike"⁷. Adina Schneeweis, critical discourse analyst and communication and journalism researcher, has argued that representations are a form of discourse and the manner that a community is presented becomes part of the larger narrative. Bhabha⁸ and Schneeweis⁹ have both argued that negative

³ Javier Diez-Palomar, Tatiana Santos Pitanga and Pilar Alvarez Cifuentes, "La Paz School: from a Ghetto to a Magnet School", *International Review of Qualitative Research* 6, no. 2 (2013): 198-209. <https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2013.6.2.198>.

⁴ For more information: http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/default_en.asp

⁵ Aidan McGarry, *Romaphobia: The Last Acceptable Form of Racism*. (repr., New York, London: Zed Books Ltd., 2017).

⁶ Radmila Mladenova et al, *Antigypsyism and Film/Antiziganismus und Filmm*. (repr., Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2020).

⁷ Mladenova, 2020, p. 5

⁸ Homi K Bhabha, *The Location Of Culture* (repr., London: Routledge, 1994).

⁹ Adina Schneeweis, "Advocacy Representation And Resistance", *Journal Of Communication Inquiry* 37, no. 2 (2013): 149-170, doi:10.1177/0196859913481475.

perceptions are accepted forms of “discourse” that shape the way that political, social and cultural institutions react to the Roma community. In her 2013 article, Schneeweis made links between texts and power and focused on the ‘who speaks for’ and ‘who has the right to speak on behalf of’ the Roma community. She also concluded that the communication representations that exist around the community are ambiguous yet strong and stakes a claim that clearer organisation and political mobilisation are needed if the Roma Movement is going to succeed and battle the popular negative narratives that are widely consumed .

The documentary and the digital scrapbook exhibition were collaboratively co-created by Roma and non-Roma and allowed people to engage with the Roma and learn about their stories and journeys within Coventry and also sit online for people to view. The final sharing at the Belgrade Theatre in early July engaged local MPs, City of Culture producers, other organisations and charities working in the field, academics, local artists, Coventry University students, local Roma families from the region and nation, and citizens of Coventry. I argue that the films and digital scrapbooks feed into the Roma Women’s Movement (RWM). The materials produced not only offer counternarratives to erroneous images of the Roma community, but the Roma women featured become references and role models for their community. This chapter reflects on creative activism by and with Roma women and makes a case that films and digital exhibitions not only challenge stereotypes but also allow those with quieter voices to come forward and express themselves. Creative activism is thus a tool that leads to social change and transformation and, in this case, enables the Urban Villages project to feed into the broader RWM. With this backdrop the Urban Villages project aimed to offer a type of truth to mainstream media and non-Roma communities.

Activism, Social Movements and Creative Activism

Activism is a wide and multifaceted concept that is used in a variety of disciplines and in particular social movements. Activism plays a central role in democracy: Joshua Atkinson suggests that “social movements and activism are integral to the different social and political discourses that effectively shape communities and culture”.¹⁰ This synergistic relationship between the two ideas surfaces when looking closely at the RWM, yet in an effort to contextualise the movement a better understanding of collective behaviour and social action is needed. Social movements can be seen as phenomena and collective behaviour as the essence of those phenomena. Atkinson states that “social movements are constructed from

¹⁰ Joshua D Atkinson, *Alternative Media And Politics Of Resistance* (repr., New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 5

the collective actions of people or organizations that have come together in order to build an alternative understanding about those issues”.¹¹ Ideological assumptions and frameworks have evolved over time and social movements may plan concentrated group actions that bring formal and informal activists together to articulate ideas of change. Social movements may offer a space where there is a collective identity where a group of people may feel part of a larger group or organisation.

László Fosztó is a social anthropologist and ethnographer who has contributed substantially to Roma studies. In his chapter *Encounters at the Margins: Activism and Research in Romani Studies in post-socialist Romania*¹² Fosztó claims that Roma activism is best understood as part of and a function of civil society. He suggests that Roma activists should “put the state back into the equation and investigate the dynamic interactions between activists, representatives of state, academics, and society at large”.¹³ Fosztó also warns that Romani activism cannot be observed within a single State, even though there are particularities observable to each localised community, since the actions are connected to other sites and are situated within a larger Roma Movement and narrative of activism.

People need to be central to the changes happening at local, regional, national and international levels. The nuances and lived experiences are integral components that unite people and allow them to find their common bonds and relate to one another. Listening to each other and allowing spaces for the often silenced to take centre stage, are important to the Roma Movement and have been integral to the movement’s development and process. Asymmetry in power relations can encourage civil and social movements to be part of the knowledge production processes which can influence systems that control political and social structures. Political theorist Huub van Baar has focussed on the Roma community and argued for interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches for examining issues of concern to Roma communities and the social, economic and political challenges they face. He reminds us that the phrase “knowledge is power” is a post structuralist expression that highlights the importance of knowledge acquisition for achieving and negotiating power politics. This point is central to my argument that actors of social movements must be involved in the decision-making processes. van Baar¹⁴ has argued that activists

¹¹ Atkinson, 2017, p. 13.

¹² László Fosztó, "Encounters At The Margins. Activism And Research In Romani Studies In Postsocialist Romania", in *Roma Activism. Reimagining Power And Knowledge Edited*, 1st ed. (repr., Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2018).

¹³ Fosztó, 2018, p. 66.

¹⁴ Huub Van Baar, "Van Baar H (2013A) Travelling Activism And Knowledge Formation In The Romani Social And Civil Movement.", in *Roma And Education In Europe* (repr., London: Routledge, 2013), 192-203.

and various discourses, strategies, techniques and expertise travel across “disjunctive circuits” and coalitions which are a productive source for developing new kinds of policy. ‘Travelling activism’, according to van Baar, disrupts mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation and is built through processes of doing, and trial and error.

Activists’ movements rely on several types of actor and are inclusive of a number of individuals. Sam Beck and Ana Ivasiuc’s *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge*¹⁵, aims to directly engage with the contradictions of past and contemporary forms of activism in relation to the Roma Movement. The editors argue that bridging reflexivity and practice allows for ‘reflexivity as practice’ within what they call “Romani activism” and academic knowledge production spaces. The book collates a number of authors who “explore ambiguous legacies and contradictions of certain forms of activism, as well as of certain ways of conducting research, framing it, or aiming at transposing research into policy”.¹⁶ van Baar argues that the “Europeanization” of the Roma community has enabled some “Roma activists engaged in governmental boards, advocacy groups, activist networks and grassroots movements to become critical players in the public and political debates about their status”.¹⁷ The inclusion of the Roma community in these spaces is an important component and as Renouard suggests “activists are very interested in how the Roma are labelled because official depictions constitute the symbolic spaces in which the Roma are able to propose new discourse and new claims”.¹⁸ Allowing the community to propose new solutions and become part of the problem-solving is essential.

Art is an important element to consider within the Roma Movement as it can help us reflect on identity and community dynamics. Within this context I am suggesting that art can be made for a variety of reasons and proposing that it has an end goal to communicate and be emotive while effective. Harrebye¹⁹ suggests that Creative activism is a form of “meta activism that facilitates the engagement of active citizens in temporary, strategically manufactured, transformative interventions in order to change society for the better by

¹⁵ Sam Beck and Ana Ivasiuc’s, *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power And Knowledge* (repr., Oxford, New York: Beghan Books, 2018).

¹⁶ Beck and Ivasiuc, 2018, p. 8.

¹⁷ van Baar, 2018, p. 26.

¹⁸ Anne-Cécile Renouard, “Constructing A Roma Cause In Contemporary Finland And Italy : The Social And Cultural Significance Of Roma And Pro-Roma Mobilizations”, in *From Silence To Protest: International Perspectives On Weakly Resourced Groups*, (repr., Routledge, 2014), 1-288: 124)

¹⁹ SF Harrebye, *Creative Activism Today. In: Social Change And Creative Activism In The 21St Century* (repr., London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

communicating conflicts and/or solutions where no one else can or will in order to provoke reflection.²⁰ Creative activism allows and relies on different art practices to disrupt and articulate alternatives for socially charged topics. Rachel Lee Rubin's²¹ volume presents interviews with a variety of artists and critically explores how art and creative activism can be political. While many examples of creative activism happen live and body-to-body, the digital space is a platform that also has the capacity to facilitate change and provide a counternarrative. For the Roma community, counternarratives are important to challenging the injustices and can lead to and foster social cohesion.

The Digital Space and counternarratives

There are metanarratives that have taken place which filter into the manner in which self-identification and Roma representation plays out. Notions of solidarity are relevant and provoke considerations of whether solidarity denies difference. If we are making a case that the Roma community is heterogenous, varied and resides in diverse environments, then does the attempt to paint a picture of solidarity and unity undo this work? For the RWM, solidarity does not mean omitting information about multiteity or aiming to conceal difference, but rather enhancing what is part of the Roma community and celebrating its heterogenous nature and multiplicity of voices. Aidan McGarry²² argues that acknowledging the value and contribution of the Romani community creates a rich and textured society. He seeks to closely analyse how the Roma organise themselves in public and identify the structures that support or impede this organising. McGarry suggests that collectively Roma are a transnational minority yet individually they are citizens of nation states. This point is relevant to our discussion and the impact that takes place when individuals organise across communities, autonomies and borders. Alexandra Oprea,²³ Roma feminist and activist, has argued that an analysis of social problems must be performed from the bottom up and “the marginalization of Romani women is a consequence of the exclusivist feminist and antiracist politics in European political spheres”.²⁴ Working from a grassroots perspective is a shift from the burgeoning model which has focussed on developing a select few Roma. According to Kerieva McCormick, “Romani feminism has the potential to be an audible voice regarding embodiment, racialisation, sexuality, and

²⁰ Harrebye, 2016, p. 25.

²¹ Rachel Rubin, *Creative Activism* (repr., New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

²² Aidan McGarry, *Who Speaks For Roma?* (repr., New York, London: Bloomsbury., 2010).

²³ Alexandra Oprea, "Re-Envisioning Social Justice From Ground Up: Including The Experiences Of Romani Women", *Essex Human Rights Review* 1, no. 1 (2004): 29-39.

²⁴ Oprea, 2004, p. 29.

subjectivity”.²⁵ Through the opening up of these discussions, the vulnerability of the Roma women and the oppressive institutions that structure their realities become exposed.

The Roma community has organised in several ways and built on mechanisms that have either been born organically from the ground up or via outside actors encouraging a change. Oprea has argued that “race, class and gender dynamics place Romani women in a precarious position”.²⁶ Oftentimes Roma women are seen as a vulnerable community and placed in a subordinate position to others in society. “The existing evidence suggests that ethnic minority and especially Roma women are the most vulnerable to multiple discrimination and present higher risks of social exclusion and poverty than the women of the native population and minority men”²⁷. Judith Butler²⁸ suggests that there is something risky and true in claiming that women and socially disadvantaged women are vulnerable. If looking specifically at Roma women, there is research that shows the in-depth intersectional discrimination that the community faces and can be classified in the following way: for being Roma, women, socially-economically disadvantaged persons, and for being people with low educational levels,^{29,30,31}. Also, in the case of Roma children and youth, previous studies have pointed out the special exclusion of this vulnerable group, as young people and for being

²⁵ Kerieva McCormick, "Intersections Of Feminist Romani Resistance: Building The Next Transnational, Diasporic, Indigenous Feminist Agenda: A Roma/Native American/Dalit Coalition", *Development* 60, no. 1-2 (2017): 104-107, doi:10.1057/s41301-017-0138-1. (p. 104)

²⁶ Oprea, 2004, p. 33

²⁷ Marcella Corsi, Chiara Crepaldi, Manuela Lodovici Samek, Paolo Boccagni, and Cristina Vasilescu. Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (European Commission), "Ethnic Minority And Roma Women In Europe: A Case For Gender Equality?", 2010, p. 5. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/560f9472-1aa0-4ddb-a863-e92460df64dc>

²⁸ Judith Butler, *Rethinking Vulnerability And Resistance* (repr., Duke: Duke University Press Books, 2016), 12-27.

²⁹ Sordé, T., Serradell, O., Puigvert, L., & Munté, A. (2013). Solidarity networks that challenge racialized discourses: The case of Romani immigrant women in Spain. *European Journal Of Women's Studies*, 21(1), 87-102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506813510425>

³⁰ Hancock, Ian. (2008) *We are the Romani People*. London: University of Hertfordshire Press, reprinted.

³¹ Teresa Sordé Martí et al., "Immigrant And Native Romani Women In Spain: Building Alliances And Developing Shared Strategies", *Journal Of Ethnic And Migration Studies* 38, no. 8 (2012): 1233-1249, doi:10.1080/1369183x.2012.689179.

Roma^{32 33} . However, what Butler and others are suggesting is that one's vulnerable and precarious situations don't have to be seen as negatives. Vulnerability is not a sign of weakness and can be a community's greatest strength. Having the courage to be present and be seen when one has no control over the outcome, is powerful and transformative. The RWM is a great example of this point where their precarious situations are turned into spaces for transformation. Geetha Marcus published *Gypsy and Traveller Girls Silence, Agency and Power*³⁴, which presents the untold stories of Gypsy and Traveller girls living in Scotland. The study reflects on the experiences of the young girls and highlights how education was central to the transformation. Angéla Kóczé, Violetta Zentai, Jelena Jovanović and Enikő Vincze published *The Romani Women's Movement struggles and debates in Central and Eastern Europe*³⁵ and the volume is rich in its content and its ability to pull together Roma women activists, academics, feminists, anthropologists, sociologists and directors of NGOs and grassroots organisations who discuss transformation. The volume focusses on Romani feminism as a way to challenge multiple forms of discrimination, oppression and analyses the social movement of the community, celebrating transformational examples such as Romani women's congresses or political leaders in European parliament and other political domains. Maria Emilia Aiello in her doctoral dissertation *Romani Women Taking the Lead for Social Transformation: The case of the Roma Association of Women Drom Kotar Mestipen*³⁶ also explored solidarity networks among the Roma women's community, using the Drom Kotar Mestipen association as a case study.

In 2018 Angela Kóczé published a section for the RomArchive Online digital archive entitled "The Building Blocks of the Romani Women's Movement in Europe"³⁷ where she goes into great details of

³² Jack Greenberg, "Report On Roma Education: From Slavery To Segregation And Beyond", *Columbia Law Review* 110, no. 4 (2010): 919-1001.

³³ David H. Arnold and Greta L. Doctoroff, "The Early Education Of Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Children", *Annual Review Of Psychology* 54, no. 1 (2003): 517-545, doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.54.111301.145442.

³⁴ Geetha Marcus, *Gypsy and Traveller Girls Silence, Agency and Power* (repr. Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).

³⁵ Angéla Kóczé, Violetta Zentai, Jelena Jovanović and Enikő Vincze *The Romani Women's Movement struggles and debates in Central and Eastern Europe* (repr. Routledge, 2019).

³⁶ Maria Emilia Aiello, "Romani Women Taking the Lead for Social Transformation The case of the Roma Association of Women Drom Kotar Mestipen" (PhD diss., Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2016), 1–312.

³⁷ Angela Kóczé, RomArchive, The Building Blocks of the Romani Women's Movement in Europe, accessed Dec 23, 2020, <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/roma-civil-rights-movement/building-blocks-romani-womens-movement-europe/>

concrete examples of Roma women and their transformational activism. Kóczé describes how in the 1920's and 1930's there was an attempt to unite all the Roma in Romania and Poland into two political organisations and in some instances, Roma women were appointed key posts. She also details that during the Holocaust,

“Ceija Stojka, an Austrian-Romani woman, survived ...these unforgettable experiences become a dominant narrative in her work as a writer, painter and musician. Alfreda Noncia Markowska a Polish-Romani woman who also survived, saved approximately fifty Jewish and Romani children from death, during the Second World War.”³⁸

The RomArchive article goes on to list key Roma women and their transformative work in all aspects of society. Yet as Moscaliuc³⁹ suggests “ ‘deethnicization’ and orientalizing of the Romani figure gained momentum and ...created optimum conditions for cultural appropriation, a process that continues, to increased detrimental effects, into the twenty-first century”⁴⁰. Narratives and reflections on the role media has in guiding narratives, is imperative as Roma, particularly Roma women, must have a space where they can accurately present themselves and highlight their realities.

Urban Villages Project background

Urban Villages was reflecting on a previous project run by the Roma Project, titled the *Growing Project* (2017) funded by the People's Health Trust. The Roma families worked closely with the allotment owner and the Coventry City Council to transform an abandoned area in the city into a space where fruits and vegetables were cultivated. The families were bused from Coventry to the allotments and the families worked inter and intra-generationally to develop, clear and cultivate the land and plant, maintain and ensure husbandry of the plants and foods they grew. Materials were also donated to other families in the city who had little to eat. The Urban Villages project team aimed to make one medium-length documentary that captured the former Growing Project and the voices of the Roma community who were involved in that project, and set out to include and focus on the Roma women and youth. The Urban Villages project broadly consisted of facilitated workshops to enable Roma people residing in the city an opportunity to share their

³⁸ Kóczé, online, 2018

³⁹ Mihaela Moscaliuc, "Accessorizing (With) "Gypsiness" In The Twenty-First Century", *Critical Romani Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 92-114, doi:10.29098/crs.v2i1.35.

⁴⁰ Moscaliuc, 2019, p.93.

own voice and create digital content for the production of a short film documenting their experiences and expressing their identity.

Understanding the needs of the Roma community in Coventry and suggesting methodological tools to approach marginalised groups and encourage agency using the arts and digital storytelling as a platform was a question the research team set out to unpack. A key output of the Urban Villages project was the digital scrapbook that was co-created with Romanian Roma families from Coventry. A digital workshop was planned and facilitated by Reel Master Productions and Cisneros which allowed the Roma families to produce still and moving images. Families also sent their own photos of the allotment, fed back to the filmmaker shots that were important to them, described locations that felt relevant, and collectively debated and decided on the title and fonts of the various effects of the film and exhibition. Those digital items were included in the final sharing, film and online scrapbooks, and were co-created with the Roma families involved.

Given that in the middle of the three-month project the COVID-19 Pandemic sent the UK into lockdown, the project needed to be quickly restructured and reconsidered to fit the new lockdown restrictions imposed in the UK. The families and all partners were flexible and willing to adopt the project to the online working environment after a conversation agreeing that we would try and see what emerged. The Roma Project's manager and director Bernie Flatley was instrumental in mobilising local families and key community connectors in the city. He asked these community agents and the families to join the meetings and/or liaise with grassroots community members and take the information back to them and to translate into *Romanes*⁴¹ and Romanian. It is true that many of the Roma families in Coventry struggled with digital literacy and using technical tools, yet the families were open to learning and the research team and the Roma Project Charity swiftly supported the families and taught them how to access such platforms like ZOOM, Skype and WhatsApp where needed. The families involved in the project knew and trusted myself from previous projects and also the Roma Project's manager, therefore asking them to share their experiences and invite them to be part of the process was possible because of this existing relationship and the established trust. The charity's manager said "much of the work we do is due to two things: lack of English and lack of ability to use technology"⁴² and while he didn't give specific figures, the pandemic allowed the Roma project to hire an individual to lead on COVID-19 related issues and digital literacy.

⁴¹ Romani and Romanes are the general names for the language and its many different variants used by Roma, Sinti, Kale and all other ethnic groups in Europe who speak or spoke an Indic, or respectively Indo-Aryan language. The term 'Romanes', derived from an adverb, is used almost exclusively in German speaking countries. For more info see RomArchive online: <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/terms/romani-romanes-romani-chib/>

⁴² Bernie Flatley, Roma Project Charity Manager, WhatsApp message to author, Dec 26th, 2020.

Incidentally, this community connector that took on this role is also a Roma woman who supported the project and this role became available post the Urban Villages project.

The digital scrapbooks were co-curated and families that participated were also interviewed pre and post the various workshops and events. The documentary and the digital scrapbook exhibition were collaboratively co-created by Roma and non-Roma and allowed people to engage with the Roma and learn about their stories, journeys within Coventry and also sit online for people to view. Post-production the filmmaker was asked on the experience and she had the following to say:

“From a Media Production point of view, the "Urban Villages" project was a dynamic, colourful, enriching cultural experience. It was great to hear the Roma family talking about a tradition they kept for years in Romania and converted it to still work and provide in Coventry, UK, all the challenges and how everybody participates in the planning process. "Urban Villages" was in all its forms a co-created project between Roma academics, Roma and non-Roma artists, Roma families and well-known community figures. It brought an innovative light over the Roma community unity and cultural strength with a view of creating new prosperity in the local context and share the example for the other communities and future generations. All the participant's initiatives were listened to and considered throughout the process of the research, filming, editing and delivery of the "Urban Villages" project.”⁴³

The research team had regular meetings with Reel Master Productions and the Roma Project to ensure that everyone was comfortable, had a space to ask questions, offer feedback on next steps and follow guidelines that honoured COVID-19 restrictions.

The project was designed to encourage the participants to reflect within themselves on what their culture is and what parts of it influence their identity and sense of the world. The outputs also aimed to educate others on Roma people's realities and share their experiences of living in the city of Coventry. This was reflected in the outputs above and achieved through including them in all of the project activities, listening to the participants, gaining feedback and using Communicative Methodology⁴⁴ to inform the creative process. CM was employed and ethical clearance was maintained at all points throughout the project and through regular conversations with the families and all the participants, including the filmmaker and the Belgrade Theatre's staff, the researchers could reflect with everyone on the various stages of the project. When the Roma Project director was asked on the impact of the project he said “it resulted in

⁴³ Raluca Maria Polodeanu, Director of Reel Master Productions, WhatsApp message to author, Dec 28, 2020.

⁴⁴ Communicative Methodology is a methodological response to the dialogic turn of societies and science, which employs a continuous and egalitarian dialogue between the researcher and the people involved in the work. This approach allows for the voices of the research subjects to enter into honest and deep discussion which in turn has an impact on the data collected and encourages new understandings and scientific knowledge. CM lends itself to working closely with the performing arts sector and artists. For this article, data collection was underpinned by CM and the researchers worked closely with the artists interviewed, allowing them to review all the materials, to input directly and to correct the researchers' interpretations.

exactly what we set out to achieve... retaining skills and traditions, and placing a Roma woman in control of the whole thing”⁴⁵. The Belgrade Theatre representative when asked to reflect on the project shared “We [the Belgrade Theatre] now take the Roma community and Rosa and Heidi’s work into our creative thinking, trying to imagine ways of engaging, connecting and creating together. A way forward is dependent on deep listening, creative thinking, collaborative planning, which is dependent on financial and/or temporal capacity.”⁴⁶ In a conversation with John Gardner from the Coventry City Council, who at the time was the Community Developer Officer in charge of community projects and instrumental in securing the abandoned land for the Growing Project, he said “it was nice to be able to come back and see the impact the project had on the families and the city itself. The project gave them a voice and turned discrimination into something positive”.⁴⁷ As is starting to emerge the Urban Villages project opened up a space to reflect on how the Roma families are living within Coventry and contributing to the city. In the next section, portions of the digital scrapbooks will be shared and framed.

Digital Scrapbook

Within such socially and politically tense moments, arts and digital tools are an entry point and serve as an equaliser to discuss highly charged topics. The Urban Villages team used the media software company IN2’s⁴⁸ digital scrapbook tool, MovesScrapbook⁴⁹, to document the process and to reflect the work of a local Roma artist. The tool was a central place to collect concept documents, stories from the community and allowed the research team and its partners to log and keep ideas in a safe, shared platform. The scrapbook also acted as a journal and the research team used this to document the project and share the process regularly. The *Urban Villages’ Process Scrapbook* contains several entries which are connected through images and text. Fig. 01- Fig.06 encompass some screen grabs from the Scrapbook. The full scrapbook can be viewed online⁵⁰.

⁴⁵ Flatley, 2020

⁴⁶ Kim Hackleman, Belgrade Theatre Community Producer, email to author and Dr Heidi Ashton, 2020

⁴⁷ John Gardner, Coventry City Council member, interview with author June 26th, 2020 on Zoom.

⁴⁸ IN2: <https://in-two.com/>

⁴⁹ Moves Scrapbook platform: <https://portal.culturemoves.eu/explore>

⁵⁰ Urban Villages Scrapbook: <https://portal.culturemoves.eu/CMteam/urban-village-the-romas-allotment-project>

Urban Village: The Roma's Allotment Project

Urban Villages aims to bring together Roma and non-Roma to co-create a short film and digital scrapbook that offers insight into the project.

GET STARTED



The digital scrapbook exhibition focuses on the experiences, identity and voices of the Roma people in Coventry and sharing what the allotment project meant to them.

Project Overview

Urban Villages aims to bring together Roma and non-Roma to co-create a short film, images and a digital scrapbook exhibition that focuses on the experiences, identity and voices of the Roma people told by the Roma people. The film will then be shared with relevant stakeholders and the wider community to foster closer links and challenge stereotypes.

LEARN MORE



Fig. 01 and Fig.02: Screenshot from The *Urban Villages' Process Scrapbook*

The Roma Project

Roma Project is based in Coventry, UK.

The overall aim of The Roma Project is to tackle the exploitation of the Roma community in Coventry and to advance their social inclusion within the city. It will also use existing links to start to build a regional network that can become part of a national network of local voices.

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Reel Master Productions was asked to support the production of the film. The company is respectful and understand the co-creative process.

Project Objectives

The Urban Villages project broadly consisted of facilitated online workshops and interviews to enable the Roma people to create their own voice and digital content for the production of a short film documenting their experiences and expressing their identity. This film and photographic stills were then presented at a sharing event for Roma people, stakeholders and the wider community with the support of the Belgrade Theatre.

Digital technologies are changing the way that people receive, engage and consume materials and information. The project team aimed to make one medium-length documentary that captured the Growing Project and the voices of the Roma community, with a focus on the Roma women and youth. The film was captured by Reel Master Productions and Claudia Tranca and allowed the Roma families to produce still and moving images that fed into the final sharing and online scrapbooks.



Passing it On

We asked young community members to explain what it means to be Gypsy.

"Wonderful. I mean being Gypsy is I don't know I'm proud of it. It's being confident in who you are and no matter your surroundings you keep your traditions and everything."

And how it feels to be Gypsy in Coventry

"We've technically lived here our whole life so feel like we belong here now"

"We feel very comfortable because here in Coventry there's so many different cultures, it's a multi-cultural city and I think that's why we feel comfortable and we've found our place here. And because of this there's tolerance with one culture to another, there's acceptance"

"We as Gypsies, we are people full of so much. We have a good heart."

"It would be lovely for you to visit now because it's the harvesting time for the strawberries and they are delicious, sweet and organic."



Fig.03 - Fig.06: Screenshot from *The Urban Villages' Process Scrapbook*

Another example of the use of the digital scrapbooking process within the project was a scrapbook created by Laura Tranca, a Romanian Roma woman living in Coventry. She created a digital scrapbook for the project where she reflected on her first weeks in Coventry as a young girl and starting secondary school. She arrived in Coventry when she was 15 years old and didn't speak any English and found comfort in her painting. Education was very important to her family and so she was immediately enrolled in school. At school, language was a challenge but she soon learned English and excelled. One day during art class the teacher asked her to draw herself. While others painted skulls and dark things she recalls wanting to paint vibrant flowers and plants and reflect on her cultural heritage. Laura went on to complete school, get full-time work in the city, and has started a family of her own. She continues to support others in her community and shares her love for art and painting with her younger siblings. Her scrapbook can be seen below and viewed online⁵¹ too.

⁵¹Laura Tranca's digital scrapbook: <https://portal.culturemoves.eu/CMteam/laura-tranca-exhibition>

Laura Tranca: Exhibition

Local Roma Artist

GET STARTED



Artwork by a Roma woman who went through the Coventry school system

Laura is young Roma artist who is from Romania. She arrived to Coventry, UK when she was 15 years old.



She didn't speak any English when she arrived and found comfort in her painting.

Education was very important to her family and so she was immediately enrolled in school. At school, language was a challenge but she soon learned English and excelled. One day during art class the teacher asked her to draw herself. While others painted skulls and dark things she recalls wanting to paint vibrant flowers and plants.



Fig. 07-09: Screenshots from *Laura Tranca's Digital Scrapbook*

The final sharing was launched by the Belgrade Theatre, a major cultural heritage institution in Coventry city. It was the first civic theatre to be built after the Second World War in Britain (1958) and is symbolic of optimism and is a major art institution in Coventry and the UK. The film and the digital scrapbooks were officially launched online in July 2020 and a panel which included academics, artists, community activists, Roma families and cultural heritage agents discussed the work and the various ways the films and scrapbooks were offering a counternarrative to erroneous images of the Roma community. The materials were tangible items that could be seen as educational, artistic and accurate reflections of the families, and the families themselves discussed the materials and framed the work. The launch was picked up by major mainstream media outlets and to date, the film and scrapbooks have had hundreds of visitors view and engage with the materials.

Discussion

The work of NGOs, charities, academics and artists is instrumental in disseminating information and ensuring that it reaches mainstream media as well as other interested parties. McGarry⁵² suggests NGOs are often thresholds between a problem and a solution. According to him they extend beyond the remit of social services and/or government/State. The NGO is able to serve as a threshold and “fill gaps where the State has failed, providing much needed services and community support.”⁵³ In this instance the Roma Project charity is an example of such a community support, as it acted as a community connector and liaised with local politicians. Networks allow for transfer of ideas and are a means to build and strengthen solidarity efforts, movements and encourage the involvement of grassroots communities. The work of the NGO and charities within Creative Activism also implicates identity. Organisational characteristics of activist groups and events frame a narrative that influences identity and impacts the work involved in the construction, maintenance and renegotiation of collective identity in social movements. Since the work of the creative activist does not occur within a vacuum and is influenced by environmental factors as well as internal and external components, identity work within social movements enters this conversation. Rachel Einwohner, Jo Reger and Daniel Myers⁵⁴ in 2008 curated *Identity Work, Sameness, and Difference in Social Movements*, a volume which explored precisely these questions of collective identity. Einwohner, Reger and Myers suggest that the *activist environment* is a “set of social, cultural and historical factors surrounding and shaping social movement activity”⁵⁵ and offer specific examples at the macro, meso and micro level. With the Roma based in Coventry, the film highlights the work of a Roma woman known as Mama Olimpia, and how she took over the allotment space, and became a leader in her community thanks to her work with the Growing Project. The film, produced under the Urban Villages project along with the digital scrapbooks, celebrates Roma women and youth and highlights the ways the families come together to honour inter and intra-generational traditions, support one another and captures the humility and sense of pride they have for their hard work. The images also offer insight into the families working together and show how the Roma are contributing to the ecosystem of the city as well as engaging with mainstream educational systems and services.

⁵² Aidan McGarry, *Romaphobia. The Last Acceptable Form Of Racism*. (repr., London: Zed Books Ltd., 2017).

⁵³ McGarry, 2017, p.165.

⁵⁴ Rachel L Einwohner, Daniel J Myers and Jo Reger, *Identity Work In Social Movements* (repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁵⁵ Einwohner, Myers and Reger, 2008, p.8.

Gathering evidence on how images and digital storytelling actually exists in the world is central to this paper. Capturing the visual brings forward social and political injustices. Meanings circulate in digital storybooks and the Urban Villages content focusses mainly on two Roma women, Mama Olimpia and Laura Tranca and we see them sharing their reflections on making or creating. In Mama Olimpia's case, we are introduced to her directing the Roma men in the community and teaching the youth to cultivate the land. We also get a glimpse into how important faith is to her as she describes the rotting potatoes in the film. In Laura Tranca's case we see visual paintings where she is expressing her feelings and emotions the paintings are direct reflections of her own cultural and personal identity. In an interview she says "while others were painting skulls and bones, I saw myself as a flower."⁵⁶ We also see that Tranca's family enrolled her immediately into school upon arriving in the UK.

In one of the digital scrapbooks online a Roma family member⁵⁷ says:

"The main reason we left Romania and came here is for our children, to give them the best opportunity to finish their studies and become professionals because, to be honest, we didn't have this chance in Romania because of all the difficulties we've been through. But we wanted to give our children the chance for a different life."

"We didn't have anything but we believe that with hard work we can do anything ... make the impossible possible."⁵⁸

In another slide we asked young Roma community members to explain what it means to be "Gypsy" and one young girl says "Wonderful. I mean being Gypsy is I don't know I'm proud of it. It's being confident in who you are and no matter your surroundings you keep your traditions and everything."

And the same group of girls were asked how it feels to be "Gypsy" in Coventry and they replied with "[w]e feel very comfortable because here in Coventry there's so many different cultures, it's a multi-cultural city and I think that's why we feel comfortable and we've found our place here. And because of this there's tolerance with one culture to another, there's acceptance"⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Laura Tranca, interview with author May 2020.

⁵⁷ It is worth mentioning that the families chose for the girls to not be named and were fine with 'Roma family member' or 'young Roma community member'. This is part of the CM approach to ensure best practices are honoured and people have a choice to self-identify and direct the research team. In this instance the minor's parents chose to not be named in the research.

⁵⁸ Urban Villages Scrapbook: <https://portal.culturemoves.eu/CMteam/urban-village-the-romas-allotment-project>

⁵⁹ Urban Villages Scrapbook: <https://portal.culturemoves.eu/CMteam/urban-village-the-romas-allotment-project>

These replies come from two girls that are eight and nine-years old. They are reflecting on having experienced racism and poor treatment from non-Roma in other places. In a conversation with the other researcher involved in the project, Dr Ashton, there was an agreement that the girls had so much love and kindness in the way they shared their stories and discussed their realities both the challenging ones and the positive situations. Also, Laura Tranca's story and Mama Olimpia both had hope and a fondness for Coventry and pride in sharing their stories and realities.

Communication scholars have been looking closely at the ways that social movements and media are interconnected. Aiello and Parry⁶⁰ describe media culture as the “cultural artefacts that embody a series of representational choices”⁶¹ and claim that stereotyping can be rigid and exclusionary. They draw on Stuart Hall's work of *othering* within representation quoting him saying “stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed”^{62,63}. The authors further state that stereotypes have a stickiness to them but that “one counterstrategy is to eclipse the prevailing negative stereotypes with more positive and diverse representations.”⁶⁴ Representation online and communities having accurate portrayals of their voices and culture are essential and transformative, and visibility can redress imbalances and encourage a shift in discourse. When creative activism is coupled with technology and artistic outputs that are focussed on shifting narratives, there is a potential to have an exponential impact. Technology is shaping the way that activism is carried out and communicated, and accessibility to materials and the creative potential digital tools allow for, are key components to this discussion. I argue that in the Urban Villages project, creative activism which included the use of digital technologies, offered a counternarrative to an erroneous image that exists of the Roma community, especially that of the Roma woman. Coupling artistic practices with an activist agenda facilitated a shift to occur for the Roma community. The making of the film, the curating of the scrapbooks and the dissemination of the project and its artistic elements, all affirmed the identities of the Roma, had an impact on the local and regional communities allowing for compassionate and critical dialogue to come through. Urban Villages was underpinned in creative activism discourse and its foundation. The research team and the Roma participants involved all set out to use the film and the scrapbooks to challenge misconceptions and stereotypes that label us as beggars, thieves, criminals and romantic others. Throughout history the Romani woman has been objectified, dehumanised, vilified and ostracised which has allowed for classism, racism and sexism to be directed towards the community. These violations of human rights that have persisted for decades

⁶⁰ Giorgia Aiello and Katy Parry, *Visual Communication, Understanding Images in Media Culture*. (repr, London: SAGE., 2020).

⁶¹ Aiello and Parry, 2020, p.5.

⁶² Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. (repr. London: SAGE with Open University, 1997).

⁶³ Aiello and Parry, 2020, p.89.

⁶⁴ Aiello and Parry, 2020, p.89.

even centuries, and created a disenfranchised community that has been the target of multiple hate crimes. Urban Villages promoted a realistic voice of the community, since we saw women like Mama Olimpia, Laura Tranca and other young girls reclaiming their identity and celebrating their traditions.

The team also aimed to engage local politicians and invited them to speak at the opening of the screening. With such engagement, the materials actively contributed to the RWM and allowed the Roma women from a grassroots community to engage in political activism. In post-interviews the women and youth involved felt that the Urban Villages project helped change minds and offer a positive reflection of them and their families. Two individuals that attended the opening at the Belgrade highlighted how much they learned from the materials and said that they felt more empathetic and compassionate to the Roma in Coventry. They also mentioned that they were keen to support the families and inquired about volunteering with the Roma Project Charity. The RWM includes actors from various positions in society and is composed of academics, activists, Roma women from grassroots communities who have come together to name the actions of injustices and offer explanations and/or solutions to remedy the tense realities of the community. Since Roma women in Coventry actively contributed and focussed on challenging the romantic and/or vulnerable image that actively circulates, their artistic offerings could be classed as a form of Romani Activism and such an effort is feeding into the broader RWM.

Conclusion

The main project outcomes were varied and some were tangible and others were intangible outputs. The project set out to make creative practices and cultural values of the Roma community visible to the wider audience, fostering empathy through highlighting similarities with other practices, as well as tackling stereotypes. The team also wanted to promote Roma voices and arts outputs both as cultural heritage assets, and as resources for the cultural and creative industry value chain, while minimizing cultural appropriation. Another important element of project was raising awareness on cultural appropriation through documenting and promoting authentic and original representations of Roma culture through creating digital storytelling films and an exhibition that celebrates the work they are carrying out in the community. Providing the Roma community with and access to advanced digital technologies which they would struggle to approach in other environments, was essential to the project. Allowing the Roma community to write their stories and express their voices using the arts through producing films and a travelling exhibition and sharing the work widely and highlighting these positive stories, counternarratives were produced which begin to challenge the erroneous images that exist and are widely circulated. There is a rich resource of knowledge that is largely currently absent from major academic environments, in particular, feminism. However, working

with the Roma, and specifically Roma women and youth, the data produced offered Roma Studies and Feminist Studies more accurate material that is reflecting diverse cultural expressions and values, thus encouraging a cultural ecosystem that enhances social cohesion and furthering several disciplines that treat the Roma community.

In summary, my intention with this chapter was to make clear that the local Roma families in Coventry and the Urban Villages research team collaborated to co-create a film and digital scrapbooks. The materials were a catalyst for change and generated meaningful conversations and encouraged non-Roma to become more empathetic of the local Roma community. My main concern was to illuminate the potentiality that exists by using creative activism and reveal that digital scrapbooks and the film celebrate diversity and are a form of travelling activism that fosters social transformation. Through engaging civic actors, artists, academics and cultural heritage institutions the Urban Villages campaign for social change reimagined a future and contributed to the RWM.

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