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Retrospective (re)presentation: turning the written ethnographic text into an ‘ethno-graphic’

Charlie Rumsby

Introduction

It is December 2018 and I am preparing to make a telephone call to friend and illustrator Ben Thomas as I travel down to Hampshire for Christmas. Ben and I met as undergraduates at the School of Oriental and African Studies. At this stage, I am preparing to submit my doctoral thesis: an ethnographic study which explored modes of identity and belonging among de facto stateless children of Vietnamese descent living in Cambodia. Despite the research being participatory and children being fully engaged in the design and interpretation of the research, I could not help shift a nagging feeling of frustration. Two questions pestered me: first, could the children ever access their own stories? Second, could I honour their request to make the research as widely known as possible?

The second question I could partly answer. I had been able to share their stories through academic conferences and teaching. Yet, there was still a boundary around such knowledge transfer. Despite the research being a fruitful endeavour with ethical integrity underpinning the process, I felt a little discontented with the overall result: an academic text written in English which would largely be read by other academic English speakers (who have access to the firewall protected double-blind peer-reviewed journal articles).

Whilst writing my thesis and pondering these questions I was invited by the European Association of Southeast Asian Studies (EUROSEAS) to get involved in a process of converting written, text heavy research into visual stories. I was happy to be given the opportunity and space to think through how I could co-create something from my thesis that would primarily be accessible to the research participants, and could also be disseminated to a non-academic audience. On the phone to Ben I explained this back story and asked him if he would like to work together to turn my thesis into an ethno-graphic novel. Thankfully, Ben agreed to our collaboration and I won an Early Career Research Impact Grant¹ to pay him for his work. The EUROSEAS workshops, and working with Ben, marked the beginning in my thinking of what I now call ‘retrospective (re)presentation’: using the visual to offer alternative modes of (re)presentation to the written ethnographic text.

The aim of this essay is to unpack the process of 'retrospective (re)presentation'. I want to encourage researchers who, like myself, have little experience but a desire to work with visual modes of representation, to experiment with non-academic collaborations. Experimentation is made easier with an example of 'how to'. To this end I invite you into my incomplete journey of co-creating an ethno-graphic novel. In particular, if you have not set out initially to contribute to graphic anthropology, or are not using drawings as observant tools for recording scenes in fieldwork, I hope to demonstrate how this endeavour can be undertaken retrospectively, drawing attention to the details of collaboration between author and illustrator.

Before digging into the practical details, the first section will offer a brief reflection on what has been called the 'graphic narrative turn' (Dix and Kaur 2019) in anthropology. Second, to offer some background to the research I will discuss the context of my research with children² of Vietnamese descent living as de facto stateless in Cambodia, and unpack the participatory visual research methods used to explore children's lives. Third, I will lay out the process of retrospective (re)presentation in practice, honing in on the question of ethics and the agency and representation of research participants.

Drawing anthropology

The use of drawing to capture what is being observed by the anthropologist has a long history. Students of anthropology will be familiar with seeing villages sketched out that include diagrams detailing a web of social relationships and other observations. Yet, sketches and illustrations such as these have historically been relegated to a footnote demoted to the supposed superiority of the written text: the primary medium for analysis and representation (Ramos 2004). Within the field of visual anthropology, drawings have not featured prominently either; discussions of audio-visual representations of ethnographic data have focussed on film and photography over drawings (Causey 2017).

More recently, there has been an increased interest in the visual – drawing in particular, as a heuristic tool when conducting ethnographic research (see Bonanno 2019). The use of drawing as an interpretative tool is not limited to analytical reflections of the ethnographic encounter. Marion Wettstein writes beautifully about how drawing ethnographic objects, in her case Naga textiles, helped her to get a deep understanding of the matter under study (Wettstein 2018). Drawings then are useful for the researcher "to perceive more or see more deeply" (Causey 2017: 38).

The possibilities of drawing, whether that be sketches, cartoons or illustrations, to enhance self-reflexivity, conduct anthropological fieldwork, and disseminate research findings to new audiences has resulted in the so-called 'graphic narrative turn' in anthropology (Dix and Kaur 2019). This turn is evidenced in the growing interest in 'drawing as anthropology-making'. A laboratory on the very topic was featured in the European Association of Social Anthropologists conference 2020 and a great number of ethno-graphic novels are being published (Dix and Pollock 2019, Hamdy et al. 2017).

My own experience of using drawings whilst conducting fieldwork is as a participatory research method. As will be explained in the next section, I have used pictures children have drawn as a way of providing space for them to explain their worlds and to inform my textual analysis. Since embarking on a journey of illustrative collaboration post-thesis, I have appreciated the potential of illustrations to “enable others to perceive more or see more deeply” (Dix and Kaur 2019: 90 drawing on Bray 2015, and Hendrickson 2008) as well as being able to share research findings with participants. Given its potential for accessibility and impact, is it not surprising that making the case for ‘ethno-graphic’ (Dix and Kaur 2019) representations is not as debatable as it once was. The first graphic novel I read was Thi Bui’s illustrated memoir ‘The Best We Could Do’ (Bui 2017). Bui’s story of her family’s journey from war-torn Vietnam provided an intimate and moving account of the realities of cross cultural resettlement, post-traumatic stress disorder, parental sacrifice, and unspoken love. Thi Bui’s ability to delicately introduce the reader to the multidimensional nature of humanity, and weave that through each character’s story in an accessible way was compelling. The emotion in the memoir was powerfully configured in the illustrated scenes. The possibilities of drawings to visualise and make accessible so many narrative layers that tease out the complexities of everyday life, in ways that are a challenge to do in the written text, motivated me to want to produce something similar. I thus set out to use the visual to offer retrospective modes of (re)presentation of the written ethno-graphic text.

The next section will introduce the context and subject of my ethnographic fieldwork, making the case for why an ethno-graphic novel has particular utility when visualising stories about childhood statelessness before going on to discuss the practicalities of retrospective (re)presentation.

Ethnographic context and research methods.

The ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia can be roughly categorised into two groups: those who have lived in the country for several generations, and recent economic migrants. My research focus is the former group, because it is their children who are at high risk of statelessness (Sperfeldt 2017). Statelessness is the condition of not possessing recognised citizenship in a state or nation. As an emerging topic of research, the subject of statelessness was initially dominated by legal analyses; more recently increased attention has been given to the lived experiences of stateless adults (Sigona 2016, Redclift 2013). According to the Institute on Statelessness and Exclusion at least 15 million people face life without a nationality today and another child is born stateless every 10 minutes³.

The growing severity of childhood statelessness warrants the need to understand it particularly from a child’s point of view. My doctoral research adds to a growing number of ethnographic studies (Beazley, Butt, and Ball 2018, Allerton 2014) that seek to understand the experiences of children who are, or live as ‘effectively’ stateless (Bhabha 2011). This growing body of literature moves beyond an analysis of what children lack – i.e. key citizenship documents, and access to essential services – and draws attention to children’s lived realities of statelessness.

Children, particularly in the Global South, have all too often been cast by aid agencies that use visual representations in their fundraising materials as passive, vulnerable and without agency (Burman 1994, Holland 1992). Stateless children unfortunately have also been, though not always, characterised this way (Allerton 2014). The children I worked with did not fit neatly into the image of the hopeless child. Quite the opposite, I encountered children who were able to shape and influence their social worlds. In this context, the production of an 'ethno-graphic' novel offers an alternative visual representation of stateless children, one where they are not cast as victims but are active in making identity relevant choices. The written text also does this, however, as I will go on to argue later, a graphic-novel uniquely centres children's agency. Moreover, the accessibility of a graphic novel has potential to reach and teach a broad audience, and casts a different light on the everyday lived reality of statelessness.

The children in this study, like most stateless children, face several barriers to education. I gained access to the group of participants involved in this research through a school known locally as the 'God school' that provided Christian education to marginalised Vietnamese communities in and around the area I call Preah Thnov. Consent was gained from both the parents and caregivers of the children, and the children themselves to be involved. Participants could withdraw from the research at any time, and consent was re-established regularly. Over the course of the research, I conducted 144 semi-structured interviews, using visual research methods, with 37 children aged between 6 and 17 years old - 13 boys and 24 girls. I also conducted participant observation and built relationships with interviewees and other adult participants and community members by hanging out with them, eating meals and having conversations about daily life.

Visual research methods, as described in the next section, worked as a powerful tool for elicitation. Children's creative outputs, and their explanation of them, became a central interpretative tool in writing the ethnography. They encouraged deep conversations about experiences that went beyond words. For example, it was through children's creative outputs that I began to understand children's agency and decision making. In this essay, I will focus on one particular area in which children demonstrated agency: that is in their appropriation of Protestant Christianity. In my research, I argued that children are not merely passive subjects of Christian indoctrination but have actively appropriated - that is taken for their own use - Christian practices in their daily lives, outside of the God School (Rumsby 2020). Thus, they have (in some cases) converted from local Buddhist practices to evangelical Protestant Christianity. Conversion, in the context of this research, denotes a process of change that involves the (re)definition of self and other in accordance, or discordance, with a religious schema (Woods 2012). Conversion is itself a discursive construct that adopts different forms and meanings over space and time, so children's experiences of faith are likely to change over time. Nevertheless, I took as primary evidence for children's agency in converting a child's articulation of changing religion or beliefs, especially how they processed their choice with family and friends.

Linking participatory visual research methods to an 'ethno-graphic'

The research agenda was devised with participants. Crucially, children had input into the formulation of the research questions and themes they wanted to explore. During a scoping study, children told me what themes, topics and experiences they wanted to explore through focus groups. After these discussions, I grouped their suggestions into four broad themes as avenues of research enquiry: time, relationships, faith, and morality. I also discussed with children what kind of methods they wanted to use, sharing ideas based on other research that had been carried out with children across the world (Bagnoli and Clark 2010, Moskal 2010, O’Kane 2008). Children chose to use visual research methods as a way to share their lives; this included their drawings and photography. Selected activities offered a temporal analysis of children’s lives. For instance, as well understanding which things and people were important to children in the present through self-portraits (Bagnoli 2009), significant events that shaped their past, and how children imagined their futures were explored using timelines. Identity flowers (Rumsby 2019) were used to elicit what constitutes participants’ sense of self and belonging.

Visual research methods proved important, both as a way of overcoming linguistic barriers, and as a mode of graphic elicitation. Through children’s creative outputs I learnt so much about the ethnographic context, and the role and place that children have there. For example during the flower petal exercise participants had to think and write down in each petal of the flower what made them who they are. The point of the exercise was to understand how participants constructed their identity and how they experienced belonging. Each petal represented an element of the participants’ perception of themselves. For example, David age 15, wrote in his petal (see figure 1) “I want to change myself”, “I want to be better at English”, “I want to learn more” and “I want to learn more about God”



Figure 1

This exercise allowed me to understand David's experience of transition through the life course. At 15 David was too old to collect the fish that had fallen from the nets of local fishermen but too young to get a paid job he explained. Therefore, when he referred to "changing himself" he was discussing a process of maturity and a desire to 'grow up' and provide for his family. In response to David writing "I want to learn more about God" I asked him "when you say God, what kind of God are you referring to?" David replied:

When I talk to God I feel happy. When I am not praying I feel so uncomfortable in my heart, I mean when I am not talking to Jesus. I pray at home, when I wash the dishes or when I feel afraid of ghosts I pray. Sometimes I feel really scared of ghosts and I pray and sing, and I forget about it and go to sleep (David, male, 15 years old).

David's account was not the first time I had heard about river ghosts: the spirits of those who had fallen in the waters children lived on. Many children spoke about them, either off the back of a drawing or a photograph they had taken. No child produced a drawing or photograph of a ghost, though they did photograph where they could be found – see figure 2.



Figure 2

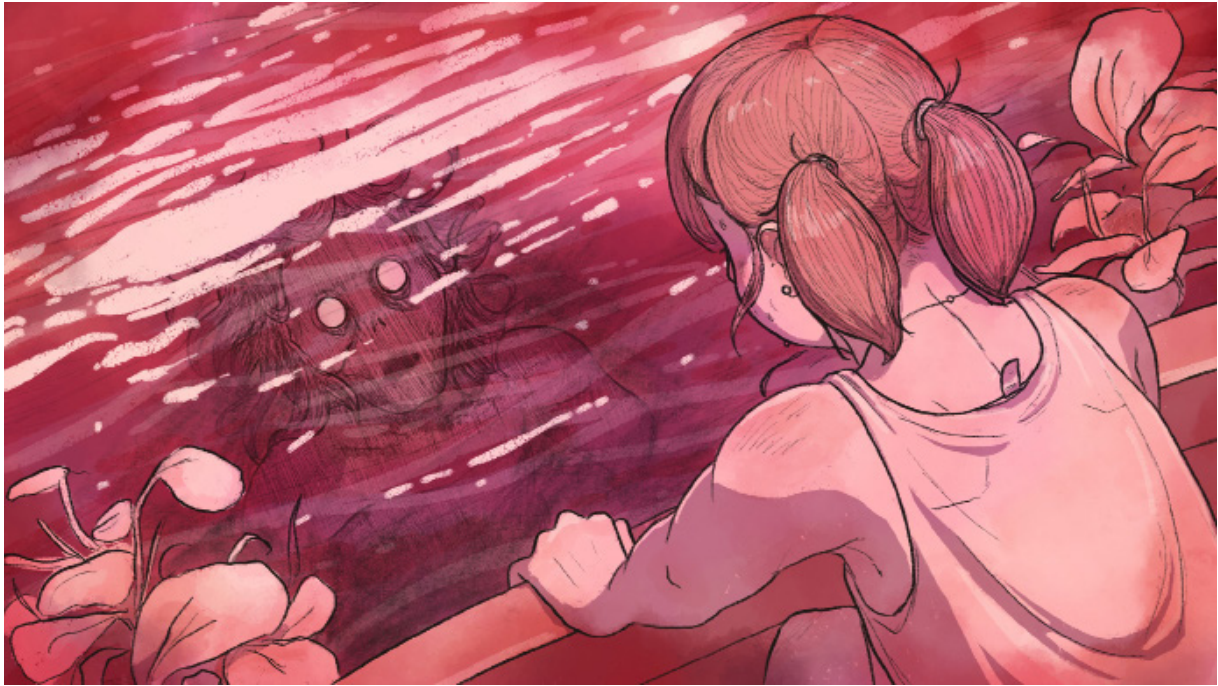


Figure 3

Working with visual research methods sparked the idea to visually depict children's stories retrospectively. Every interview I conducted centred on a child's drawing or a picture they had taken. Yet our conversations often touched on experiences that words could not capture. For instance, May, a girl aged 7, once drew a picture of her house. During the conversation about her drawing she told me she had seen a river ghost and how she had trouble sleeping. The story as she told it stayed with me. To use the drawing of the house would not capture the encounter of seeing a ghost. Yet, an illustrated account could, see figure 3. Detailing children's belief in river ghosts or the use of Christian prayer with text is possible but the representation of fear through text is challenging. As mentioned in David's account earlier, prayer was a key tool used by children to quell the fear of river ghosts. The potency of children's prayers and faith provided children with a basic yet fundamental need – sleep. I wanted to capture this potency along with other experiences through illustration. See figure 4.

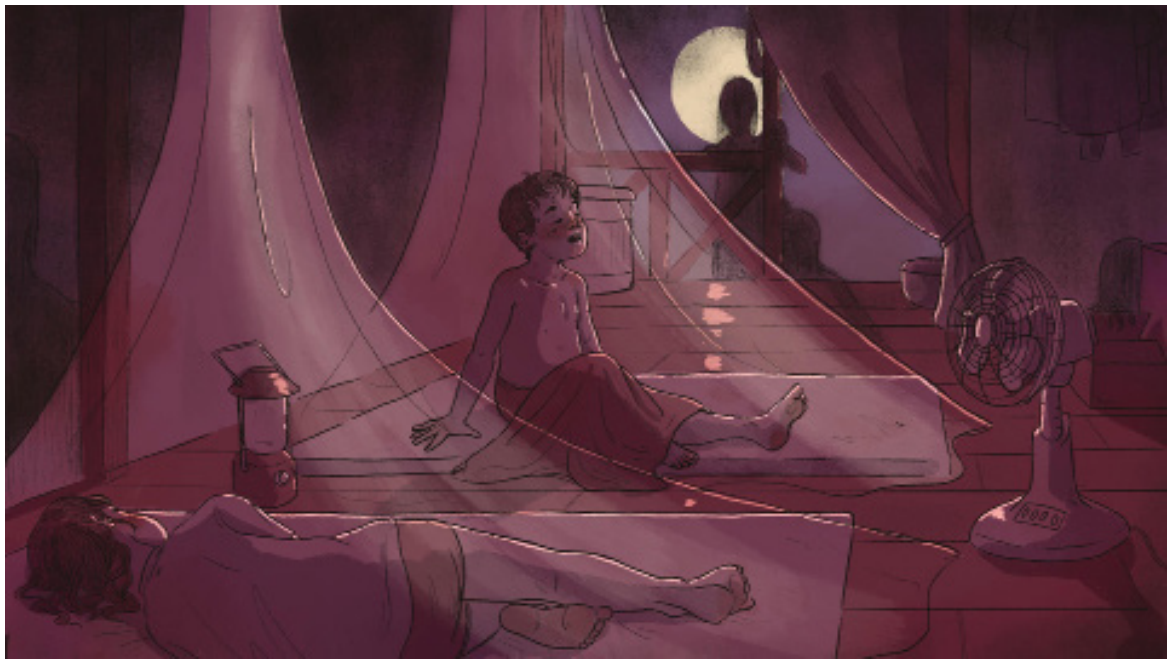


Figure 4

Listening to children's stories processed through visuals gave me so much material to interpret and analyse. When doing the analysis and writing the ethnography I realised that talking to children about their experiences of conversion, their use of prayer to still things like fear of river ghosts and the dynamics of converting outside of your family's religion are things that for the most part, represent ineffable realities. This is what inspired me to undergo a process of retrospective (re)presentation. I did not want to replace the written text but rather I wanted to work with Ben to draw my already analysed findings to allow for another possible avenue for dissemination, but also understanding.

Doing retrospective (re)presentation: ethical considerations

The EUROSEAS workshops marked the beginning of a process of retrospective (re)presentation. I discussed ways of effectively capturing emotion through illustration with other visual methods researchers⁴. This included learning to not begin with layers of historical context (a starting point for many academics) and instead getting to the heart of the story. This opened a new ethics process. Despite previously having ethical clearance for data which I had already published, I had to think through what (re)presenting children's accounts would entail, especially the possibility of misrepresentation.

Institutionally, I was required by my ethics committee to regain consent from children who participated in the research to have their stories illustrated. I had consent to use all data for written and public outputs. I had even gained consent for public exhibitions. Yet, because I did not have specific consent for an illustrator to illustrate published data, I had to go back to Cambodia to regain consent for the whole project of retrospective (re)presentation. I was happy to do so, I was planning to share the idea of an ethno-graphic novel with the children I had worked with, and I was going to Cambodia again that year anyway.

I spent two weeks regaining consent. I explained that Ben and I would work to the same level of anonymity when drawing their stories as I did when writing them. For everyone I worked with, the idea of a graphic representation was exciting. I brought with me a few initial examples of illustrations (figures 3 and 4 were included) which were well-received, and I made time to ask for feedback. Some children, who were now 16-18 years old, nonchalantly replied to the question about drawing their accounts: "yes, why not? It is better for us". One of the things that I had to explain was that the process would be incredibly slow because of the costs involved. Returning to the UK, I used my early career research impact grant to pay for the development of illustrations and a project website which enables me to communicate with participants and a broad audience before the ethno-graphic novel is completed.

As mentioned, children were the main participants in my doctoral research. Their stories framed and directed the lines of enquiry. Yet, I have found that when retelling their stories and analysing them it is the author's voice that is prominent. Even when their stories are transcribed word for word on the pages of an article or thesis chapter, it is my voice as author that directs interpretation, guides the reader and offers struc-

ture to the accounts being told. Now, I am not suggesting that using illustrations as a means of retrospective (re)presentation does not offer the viewer narrative guidance; the strokes of an illustrator's pen and the process of giving feedback does indeed create an architecture of meaning.

What is different to the written text is the primacy of the visual. Not only the primacy of the visual, but the opportunity granted by visuals to see children's emotion and energy in a way that centres their agency and voice in ways that do not follow the linear argumentation of a text based analysis. Retrospective (re)presentation is not a simple case of dumping published text onto the lap of someone who can draw. Retrospective (re)presentation, much like the process of 'writing culture' (Clifford and Marcus 1986), should entail a careful consideration of the ethics of representation, including, where possible, research participants in the process of meaning making. Dix and Kaur argue that drawing should be inscribed into the "writing of cultures" as a representational practice. Much of my current experience speaks to this assertion, particularly when considering representations of reality. The quotation below summarises the process that will be unpacked in later sections:

The ethno-graphic novel is not intended to represent "reality" in an objective sense. On the one hand, the truth or representation is based on the filtering of events and experiences through individual testimonials and the creative license deployed in working in the graphic medium. On the other, it enables participants and viewer-readers to "see the truth" in the schematized and fictionalized representations. The way truth is deployed here is not to refer to a particular series of events, but a generic series of events created through the affective intensities and investments in the medium. Truth here also implies an empathetic ethic that does not objectify or sensationalize specific individuals and their experiences (Dix and Kaur 2019: 107–108).

The scenes Ben has drawn and are included in this essay are not observations of events in real time. They are (re)presentations of stories shared with me. Events I, myself, did not observe. The ethno-graphic novel then adds another constituent of graphic anthropology that goes beyond drawing as a means of capturing ethnographic observation. Shah (2018) compares the process of a visual representation of ethnographic text to translating research into a different language – as a writer you want to ensure your research and ideas are being correctly represented. Similarly, you have to consider both the illustrator's artwork and the interpretation of the audience.

The next sections will explore the dynamics of collaboration.

Doing retrospective (re)presentation: the agency and representation of research participants

During the research period, children told me of their intimate connection to the Tonlé Sap River, the moments of fun swimming in it on hot days, bathing together and splashing around. The river was also used for fishing, a way to earn money for many families. Yet, moments of play were also interrupted by moments of tragedy. Many children shared with me stories of death. These heart-breaking accounts of siblings or others falling into the water were often shared in interviews, and provided a stark contrast to otherwise ordinary moments of play.

The first story Ben and I worked on was taken from a section in an essay I wrote for the worldwide report on childhood statelessness (Rumsby, 2017)⁵. We called it the 'Waters of Death and Life'. The sequence of drawings represented an account shared with me by Gu, when discussing their timeline relating to the past. The story is Gu's earliest memory, a tragic account of the death of Gu's sister. To begin the process, Ben and I discussed over the phone the contextual importance of living on the water. I shared with Ben the difficult reality and contrasting experiences children shared with me about life on the waterways. I followed our conversation by sending Ben a (very basic) storyboard which laid out the specific scenes as I saw them. The storyboard did not include my drawings but pictures taken from clipboard with a few written lines of what each scene should include. I also sent Ben articles from the Phnom Penh post and New York Times regarding the Vietnamese communities in Cambodia together with sections of my thesis and a few pictures I had taken of the floating villages.

[See HTML Version for accompanying video content](#)

The first batch of illustrations (figures 3, 4, and 5) excluded text but it was the published ethnographic text that very much framed the illustrations. Ben used a lot of what he would call his style from colour and drawing tool choices, to the way the characters look and feel. Coincidentally, Ben had been using watercolour-style brushes and textures in his digital art and, with the theme of water at the forefront of the work, this style fit perfectly. I shared the illustrations with participants as well as academic colleagues and friends in the UK to gain feedback and get to a sense of how they might be received. I have noticed there is a confidence in the viewer to construct meaning from images rather than text (Becker 1995); decoding a set of illustrations has not been a scary experience (Harper 2012) especially so among friends and family who have not dared to embark on reading my PhD thesis!

Figures 3, 4 and 5 were a good starting place for Ben and me to experiment with storytelling. The next stage was to try comic panelling. Going over the research material the potency of children's stories of conversion to Christianity stood out as another entry point to undergoing retrospective (re)presentation. Often, with conversion narratives a common response is to think about the possibility of manipulation, especially so for children who are converting. A critical analysis of power dynamics and the processes of

conversion is imperative, but this should not shroud the possibility of children's agency in their own conversion or Christian practice. Capturing that agency through an image is possible (figure 4), yet given the sensitivity of the issue we felt it was important to combine text and image: utilising the power of an image to condense complex information, and convey strong messages (Nicholson-Cole 2005) and the text to centre children's voices. These concerns led to devising an output more commonly associated with sequential art, offering the reader an order of panels to be read. Moreover, these comic style (re)presentations are also stepping stones towards thinking through what an ethno-graphic novel would entail.

During the research, children were often in conversation with their friends and parents about their change of religious beliefs and practices. I wanted to draw these interactions through the medium of the comic. The distinguishing features of comics are the ways that illustration and text work together to convey meaning (Wartenberg 2012). I took a conversation retold to me by a participant, who was 13 at the time, about the reaction of her friends to her recent decision to become a Christian: see figure 6. It was important that the interview transcript used in my thesis was unedited and included. To this end the "pictures were anchored in words" (Sousanis 2015: 53). I shared with Ben a couple of photographs I had taken of the research area, and described how I thought the scene should look. Children often played volleyball so to have a net in the background captured the notion of play. Ben added details which I did not think of but are in fact common scenes, for instance people drinking from plastic cups through a straw. All these small details built a sense of normalcy and represented the everyday activities of children.

The way the interaction was described to me during an interview felt very much like a normal interaction among children. There was teasing, meaning making, and laughter. Of course, for the child being bold enough to explain her changing beliefs there was a little frustration that her friends did not understand something so personal, yet they maintained their friendship nonetheless. Capturing the spirit of the moment was key to the direction I gave Ben early on. Ben, undirected, emphasised emotion through facial expression but also by emboldening certain words within the text. I thought this added depth and moments for pause whilst viewing the panel.

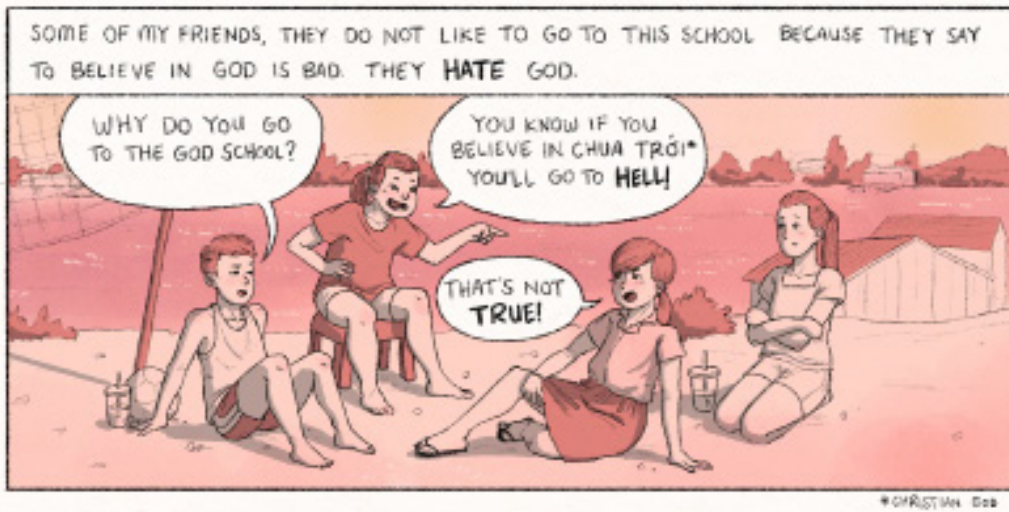


Figure 6



Figure 7 third panel

Whilst most of our work has been a straight forward interaction, Ben and I have encountered moments of (friendly) challenge during our collaboration. This was evident in the creation of a scene of a child processing her conversion with her parents.

On one occasion a child told me that since becoming a Christian they were not allowed to visit the temple anymore. Instead, they must stay at home and look after the house. The child said they imagined that if they went to the temple they would face a spanking. This was not said in a frightened way, more as a matter of fact. The emphasis in the interview was the interaction within the family after conversion, the setting of new boundaries in the domestic and religious sphere. Yet, illustrating an imagined scenario proved challenging. This iterative process between myself and Ben also raised some issues of representation.

Comics are known for their exaggerated style i.e. the exaggerated expression suggests what the character is feeling inside (Wartenberg 2012). This hallmark can also lead to overstated personalities which can create an adverse reaction. Following the journey of the same girl in figure 6, Ben drew the interaction the girl had with her parents where they said she could not go to the temple and her imagined sense that she would be spanked if she did: see figure 7. Compared to the lightness and humour that were the strengths of the interaction among friends, the interaction between parents raised various sensibilities that I felt should be approached with caution. For instance, my first impression when seeing the first draft of figure 7 – the third panel - was to think the child could be in danger of a beating. This was not the spirit in which the child shared the story. The implied swearing and the word “whack”, whilst offering a very definite interpretation, was not congruent to what was shared in the interview. This collaborative moment engendered a similar reflexive process I went through when initially interpreting children’s interviews. In order to circumvent possible misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the participant I spent time thinking through the different cultural interpretations. For instance, whilst in Southeast Asia the illustration would not be as offensive, in the UK the idea of spanking a child is (by and large) considered inappropriate discipline and may detract from the point of the comic, which was to show the negotiations within the household.

Ben and I decided to see if we could visualise the conversation in a different way: see Figure 8. This time around we decided to make the text lead the imagined scenario. This included drawing an imagined interaction at the temple with the girl’s father ordering her home. Whilst the temple scene has the features of comic exaggeration, the third panel draws out the feelings of the parents who also are processing the changes in their child. To this end, the balance between family conflict and intimacy is achieved between the parents accepting their daughter’s choice and agency, with their own boundary setting. Figure 8 also highlights another defining feature of comics, the conflation of multiple time frames and locations which can exist side by side (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower 2018). Panel three in figure 8 for instance is the parents leaving for the temple after having the conversation with their daughter. Yet the linear timeline is interrupted by the imaged scenario.



Figure 8

Character (re)presentation

During the initial research that this process of retrospective (re)presentation is based on, anonymity of all participants was adhered to. There were no changes in that decision moving to image based retrospective (re)presentations. When I took the time to share initial drafts with colleagues and friends, a common reflection I received was that the characters did not “look very Vietnamese”⁶. I too noticed this, and whilst this was not intentional, I was actually content to leave it as such. I felt it important that Ben had some artistic license to bring his own style in. This included making choices about colour and drawing tools, to the way the characters look and feel. The watercolour-style brushes and textures used in images offered a softness which I think opens

up the possibility of connection across different audiences. On reflection, the fact that the characters are not “obviously” Vietnamese allows for what McCloud (1993) would call “masking”. That is, there being an opportunity for non-Vietnamese readers to enter the world of the comic through the eyes and emotions of the characters. This is an important part of the comic building process. It is an invitation to enter into the world of a stateless population, and empathise with a whole host of experiences that are not directly correlated to their uncertain citizenship status. Life goes on despite being stateless. This is a humanising strength of the comic, it moves the viewer beyond a stark assessment of what these children lack and reveals the details of their daily lives. In particular, children’s agency is given centre stage and their stories can be engaged with.

That being said, one limitation in our work has perhaps been the lack of opportunity for Ben to travel to Cambodia and visit the communities he is drawing. A fieldwork trip would no doubt benefit future productions. The power of the field trip is wonderfully articulated in a behind the scenes documentary of the making of *Lissa: a graphic novel* written by academics Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye, and illustrated by artists Sarula Bao and Caroline Brewer. In the making of the documentary the academic authors and illustrators go to Egypt where the book is set. You can see how the sensual experience of walking Cairo’s streets and meeting people who participated in Egypt’s Arab Spring add to the depth of character representation and scene setting. The main discussion points Ben and I have had so far are about adding details that speak to the cultural codes and expectations of a Cambodian scene. So for instance, whilst we decided not to draw obviously ‘Vietnamese’ people, the scenes themselves are full of cultural references. For instance, Figure 9 depicts a scene described to me by a mother of Cambodian descent who is married to a Vietnamese man. They have been charged extortionate amounts of money for their children’s birth certificates which they cannot afford. The characters’ faces capture the misery of the situation. Yet, something was missing that would locate it geographically.



Figure 9

Without visiting Cambodia Ben would not have known that in many places pictures hang of Norodom Sihanouk, former King of Cambodia and of Her Majesty Queen Norodom Monineath Sihanouk of Cambodia. I sent Ben an email with a google image of the royal pictures and asked him to add them. See figure 10. This little detail illustrates how context setting is made possible.



Figure 10

Concluding thoughts

In this essay I have supported Dix and Kaur's proposition that drawing should be added to the "writing of cultures". Retrospective (re)presentation is not simply an interest in drawing as method, but drawing as a representational practice. Unlike working with visual methods that encourage photo elicitation (Harper 2002), or images that work to illustrate or amplify a text, the work of graphic anthropology invites a diverse group of people into an otherwise complex academic narrative. This includes, most importantly for me, the research participants themselves. Taking on this kind of work should be approached with caution. Authors and illustrators ought to reflect on the ways they draw and (re)present. This is not so different to the process of the ethnographer constructing written narratives. Yet, given the potential for great reach in producing an ethno-graphic novel it is important that where possible people whose lives are being (re)represented are involved in the process. Wettstein (2018) reminds us that "when consciously composing a drawing you have to be clear about what you want to show, and the visual representation becomes a statement in your line of argumentation; just like a sentence is a statement in your textual argumentation".⁷

The journey I have presented is incomplete but I hope it offers some insight into the considerations that go into retrospective (re)presentation. When I asked the Ben what he thought illustrations / comics can bring to academic representations of statelessness and children's lives, his answer summed up the power of our collaboration beautifully:

I think perhaps comics and illustration can also help to bring research to life on a more emotional, personal level. Academic research can, out of necessity, feel distanced from the people and issues that it represents, and by focusing on the stories of individuals, storytelling through the arts can help bridge that gap between the academic and the real lives and emotions of the people involved (Interview with Ben Thomas 2020).⁸

Notes

1 From the Association of Southeast Asian Studies UK

2 I defined children as people under the age of 18 in line with the United Nations Convention of the Child. This was a prerequisite for ethical clearance. In Cambodia children are categorised as those under the age of 15 (Wallquist 2002). Data used in the essay is from participants under 15 years old.

3 <http://www.statelessnessandhumanrights.org/>

4 A special thank you goes to Rosalia Namsai Engchuan for our extended correspondence and encouragement in this process.

5 <http://children.worldsstateless.org/3/mobilising-against-childhood-statelessness/researching-childhood-statelessness.html>

6 Interesting participants themselves have never said this.

7 <http://www.marionwettstein.ch/ethnographic-drawing/>

8 <https://www.charlierumsby.com/post/illustratinganthropology>

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