

## Special Theme

### Ethno-graphic Collaborations: Crossing Borders with Multimodal Illustration

# Waters of Death and Life: The Evolution of an 'Ethno-Graphic'

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## Abstract

Collaborating with illustrator Ben Thomas, we have embarked on a journey of taking the ethnographic written text and converting it into an 'ethno-graphic' novel. This piece presents the evolution of working with single images, organising single images into a sequence amplified with interview transcripts, to the creation of comic panels. Each sequence explores the qualities illustration can bring to ethnography: empathetic empathy, ethnographic anonymity, alternative modes of storytelling, and representing the intangible elements of participant's everyday lives. Whilst this project is in-process, the potential of graphic anthropology, as an interdisciplinary activity, to aid the communication and analysis of ethnographic research beyond disciplinary boundaries offers new pathways for academic and empathetic exchange.

**Key Words:** collaboration, illustration, graphic anthropology, visual methods, empathetic ethics

- 1 As shown in the quotes below, the creation of an ethno-graphic novel offers anthropologists an opportunity to discuss their research beyond the ethnographic text. Graphic anthropology must consider the ways in which images are curated, represent the lives of research participants and how stories are (re) told. This is not unique in anthropological practice. What is unique to graphic anthropology are the ways that an image can disrupt traditional preferences of the text - that is often laden with impenetrable language that only the trained can process. The project I present here is an insight into the collaborative

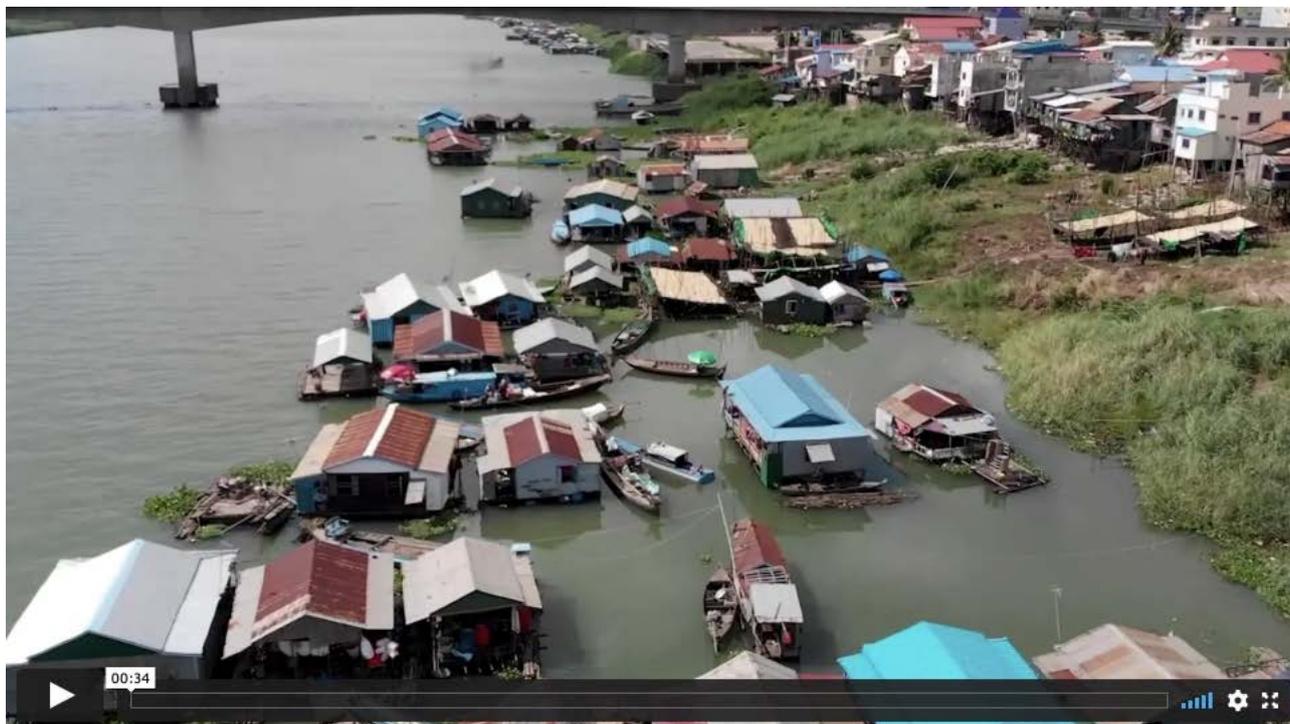
process that I have called ‘retrospective (re)presentation’: using the visual to offer alternative modes of (re)presentation to the written ethnographic text (Rumsby, 2020: 7).

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, as quoted in Rumsby 2020)

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)

- 2 The goal of this collaboration is twofold: (1) is to make the ethnographic account available to participants in an accessible way (2) to take ethnographic research into new spaces of engagement.

## 1. Introduction



**Film 1** Still Image from *Introduction*<sup>1)</sup> (Rumsby 2020)

## Transcription

Children of Vietnamese descent who live on the waterways of the Tonle Sap and Mekong River in Cambodia have an intimate relationship with water. I am working with illustrator Ben Thomas to convey this relationship and turn 'text-heavy' ethnographic research into an accessible 'ethno-graphic' novel. Whilst this is a work in progress, our journey so far has shown that illustrations can bring the viewer closer to the research site whilst maintaining anonymity, generating empathy, and articulating the intangible.

## 2. Empathetic Ethics



**Film 2** Still Image from *Empathetic Ethics* (Thomas and Rumsby 2020)

## Transcription

Statelessness is a real threat to communities of Vietnamese descent who have lived in Cambodia for generations. Often families cannot get birth certificates for their children, leaving them excluded from essential services like education. Illustrations offer a powerful opportunity to see stateless populations in their humanity and bring to life how their rights are denied to them.

As shown here, Ben is a digital illustrator, and his drawings are directed by my research data. This drawing, an interaction between a family and Cambodian bureaucrat, illustrates a story told to me by the mother who was denied Cambodian birth certificates for her children because of their father's

Vietnamese heritage. In the interview transcript the mother explained that she was being charged \$100 per birth certificate, per child. In our collaborative practice, I sent Ben my write up of this interview and explained how I thought participants ought to be represented. Paragraphs of text were then condensed by Ben into an image which I then offered feedback on.

Ben was able to capture the sentiments gathered in my research well. The poster that reads “Birth Certificates \$100” and the forlorn expressions on participant’s faces ignite and convey the emotion in the story as it was told to me. The father’s glance at the mother, reveals his internalisation of the exclusion the family face. This powerful posture, drawn by Ben, reveals how even though the family’s situation is a miscarriage of justice, the poor are often left to feel as though they are the perpetrators of their own fate, and not the State. Immediately looking at this image you can see the power dynamics between the administrator and the those at the mercy of their judgement. You the viewer are invited to feel this discrimination, and can participate in theoretical discussions regarding power, justice, and exclusion.

### 3. Ethnographic Anonymity



**Film 3** Still Image from *Ethnographic Anonymity* (Thomas and Rumsby 2020)

## Transcription

The bustling sound of motorbikes, cockerels and children's conversation was amplified through the narrow street where the school is located. At 6:30 am schoolgirls in their uniforms would sit gathered around a food stall slurping noodles. Outside the school groups of children talked and ordered each other around excitedly as they play games, skipping over a large elastic band that is lifted higher and higher to increase the difficulty of the task with every successful jump. These are scenes I witnessed daily (Rumsby 2019: 136).

Anonymity is an ethical principal within my fieldwork practice enhanced by illustration. In our collaboration, Ben works with contextual images I provide him, but his artistic style characterises the 'look' of characters. The fact that the characters are not 'obviously' Vietnamese allows for what McCloud (1993) calls "masking".

Comics allow for relatability. Non-Vietnamese viewers can connect with the lifeworlds of the characters as they read the emotions on their faces and get a sense of what children do day-to-day. The narrative of statelessness is not at the forefront, instead it is of children who like to play, are mischievous and go to school.

## 4. Waters of Death and Life: Preface to Comic Panelling



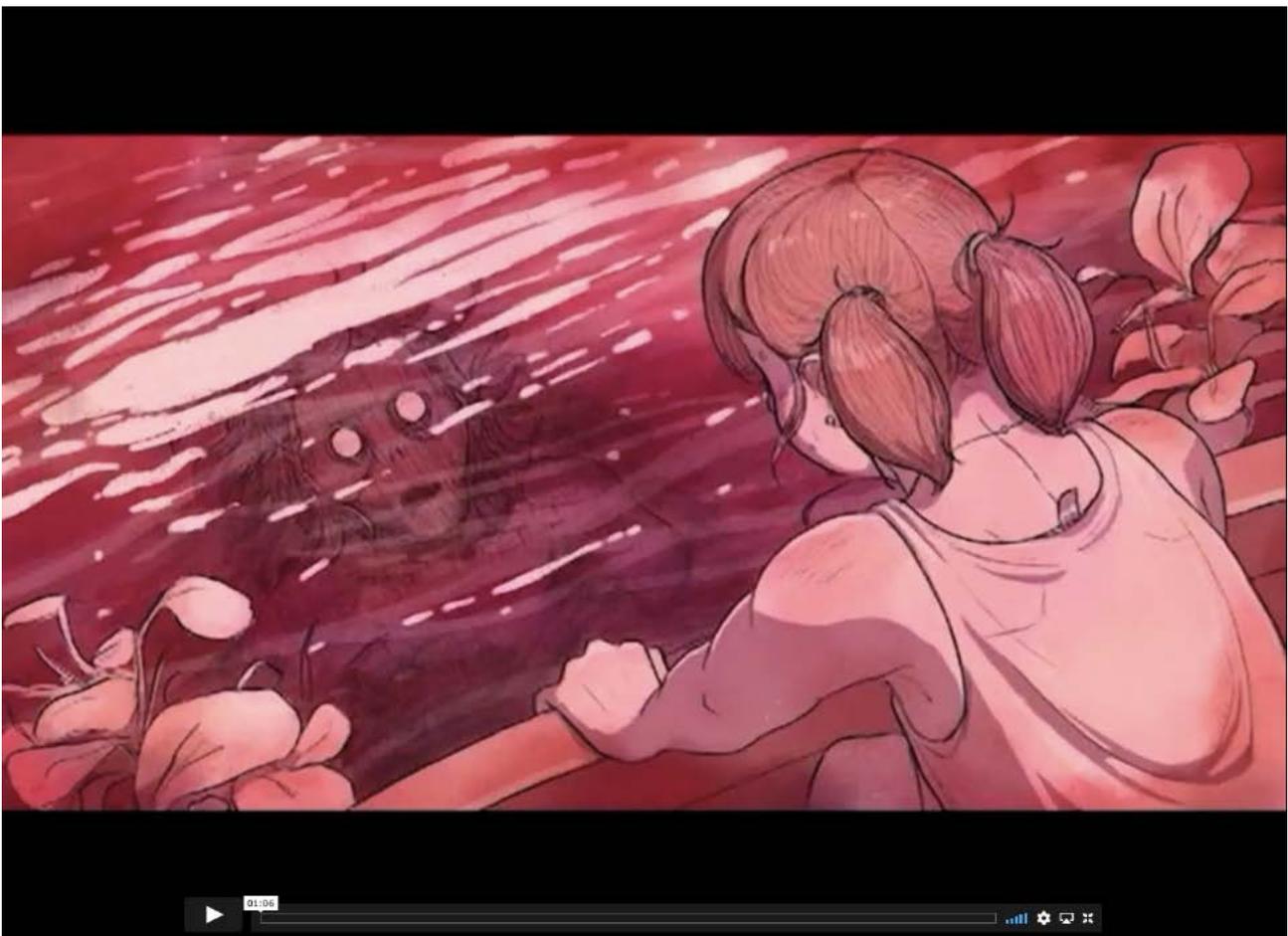
**Film 4** Still Image from *Waters of Death and Life: Preface to Comic Panelling*<sup>2)</sup> (Thomas and Rumsby 2020)

## Transcription

Ben and I have experimented with 'comic' descriptions of children's stories that are particularly difficult to tell because of their morose nature; for instance, children drowning in the water.<sup>3)</sup> When storyboarding, Ben and I first put together a sequence of images. We then included the interview transcript in between images as a preface to our later use of the comic panelling method to detail children's stories.

This illustration was the first project we worked on. The opening image of Gu looking out of a bus, daydreaming, is a reference to the timeline past method I used during the research. Children would draw their timelines to explore their history and memories. The sequence starts with Gu looking out of the bus and ends with Gu looking out of the bus. This creates a sense of beginning and end, in this piece Gu's earliest memory at 7 years old is relived.

## 5. River Ghosts: Exploring Intangible Elements of Children's Everyday Lives



**Film 5** Still Image from *River Ghosts: Exploring Intangible Elements of Children's Everyday Lives*<sup>4)</sup> (Thomas and Rumsby 2020)

## Transcription

Life and death on the river had opened another relationship with water. At times children were afraid of 'river ghosts': the spirits of those who had fallen. Faith was a strong narrative in the lives of some children who spoke openly of their conversion to Christianity.

Discussing topics like faith, religious conversion, and the use of prayer to resolve deeply felt fears often felt like trying to describe the indescribable. Prayers when spoken can be written out but communicating how prayer is used by children in the middle of the night when engulfed by the horror of river ghosts is difficult. Yet, through drawings the sequence of events from being woken up by terror, to praying, and then sleeping within the peace of God could be captured powerfully (Rumsby 2020: 14–15).

## 6. Comic Panelling



Film 6 Still Image from *Comic Panelling* (Thomas and Rumsby 2020)

## Transcription

The sequences you have watched so far have intended to provide insight into how Ben and I have journeyed towards creating an 'ethno-graphic' novel. Re-telling stories as they were retold to me in interviews, required capturing the sentiments within an interaction and animating them so that the personalities of the characters involved could come to life.

The story of a girl 'coming out' as a Christian had the hallmarks of teenage banter, teasing and meaning making. Ben and I aimed to show the different positionalities within the group. First, you have the sincere girl who is trying to tell her friends something so personal. Second, you have the curiosity of the friends as they listened and stated their own beliefs and third, we wanted to capture the playfulness embodied within the interaction. To offer moments for reflection whilst viewing the panel, Ben undirected emboldened words. The pictures in each panel were "anchored in words" (Sousanis 2015: 53), words taken directly from the interview transcripts. Volleyball was a popular game enjoyed by many, so to have a net in the background not only captured the notion of play but built a sense of normality, as the volleyball net was a usual spot to hang out in the village. All these details helped build a picture of the story as it was told to me initially (Rumsby 2020: 17–19).

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Notes**

- 1) The music was produced by Pete Myson.
- 2) The music was produced by Pete Myson.
- 3) See <https://illustratinganthropology.com/charlie-rumsby/>
- 4) The music was produced by Pete Myson.

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