



Graphic Lives, Visual Stories: Reflections on Practice, Participation, and the Potentials of Creative Engagement

Sara Wong, Rachel Shapcott & Emma Parker

To cite this article: Sara Wong, Rachel Shapcott & Emma Parker (2020) Graphic Lives, Visual Stories: Reflections on Practice, Participation, and the Potentials of Creative Engagement, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 35:2, 311-329, DOI: [10.1080/08989575.2020.1741191](https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2020.1741191)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2020.1741191>



Published online: 02 Jul 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 77



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Graphic Lives, Visual Stories: Reflections on Practice, Participation, and the Potentials of Creative Engagement

Sara Wong, Rachel Shapcott, and Emma Parker

ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of creative storytelling through an organizational case study. PositiveNegatives researches, produces, and disseminates graphic narratives around migration, conflict, and asylum through participatory methodologies. This reflection pulls from relevant academic literature, as well as practice, to understand how PositiveNegatives' graphic stories operate in the world. Visit www.positivenegatives.org to see the full portfolio.

KEYWORDS

comics; refugees; participatory methodologies

Introduction

By telling my stories, I wanted to give a voice to people who experienced similar circumstances. I believe stories can be very healing and many people benefit from getting the opportunity to pass on their wisdom to others ... we are all experts in our own lives and we all have something to share.¹

At PositiveNegatives we make comics, animations, and graphic narratives about real-life stories of conflict, displacement, forced migration, and more. Our work is often based on first-person testimonies that, through our co-creative practice, we transform into visual stories. These stories have been published and printed all over the world, from displays at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo to news outlets such as the *Guardian* and the BBC. Our focus is always on lived experience. A crucial part of our mandate is to illuminate the human lives and personal stories behind the headlines.

PositiveNegatives was founded in 2012 by Dr. Benjamin Dix, who worked for the United Nations in Sri Lanka during the final years of the country's civil war. As a result, he became interested in how best to



Figure 1. Panel extracted from “A Perilous Journey,” by Lindsay Pollock (artist) © 2015. Funded by Norwegian People’s Aid. Used with permission of PositiveNegatives.

represent the often marginalized stories of the Tamil community, both in the country and abroad. After reading Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*, he realized that comics were a valuable medium for telling complex, real stories. Following his PhD thesis,² Dix went on to gather testimonies from dozens of survivors across the Tamil diaspora, forming the basis for PositiveNegatives’ first graphic novel, *Vanni: A Family’s Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict*.³

PositiveNegatives’ initial projects were largely focused on issues of migration and experiences of refugeedom. These include the three comics entitled “A Perilous Journey,” based on testimonies from Syrian refugees (figure 1),⁴ and our fourteen-part series “Meet the Somalis,” representing the distinctive experiences of diasporic Somali communities across Europe. These projects have led to our firm association with, as Candida Rifkind notes, “a subfield of graphic life narratives that use sequential hand-drawn comics, often produced collaboratively, to intervene in the photographic regime of the migrant as Other.”⁵ While we have expanded beyond this early remit—subsequently creating visual narratives on intersexuality, drug addiction, missing persons in conflict, and irregular citizenship status—the stories of refugees are at the heart of our organization and, in turn, make up a large part of our portfolio. Our comics and visual stories are increasingly scrutinized and discussed by academic researchers

for how they might humanize “the stories of refugees, potentially enabling encounter, empathy and connectivity.”⁶ However, as our future projects are tackling topics such as the environment and gender equality, we consider the scope of our work as best understood not wholly through specific issues, but *how* we choose to represent these themes and narratives.

Where possible, PositiveNegatives works with people to tell their own stories, placing the participants at the heart of the creative process. We collaborate with artists based around the world, from south London to New Delhi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Our global network brings together artists and subjects to co-create visual narratives. Our creative methods are dynamic and continuously developing, but we do our utmost to ensure that our processes are sensitive to the cultures, histories, and beliefs of the participants’ communities. Our partners on these interdisciplinary projects include various universities and international media outlets, along with organizations such as the United Nations, Overseas Development Institute, and Open Society Foundations. As such, our collaborative storytelling practice moves across numerous intersections of the arts, academia, journalism, education, and advocacy. In this case study, which reflects critically on PositiveNegatives’ work and practice, we examine our own storytelling methods. This article’s focus is on three projects: “Dear Habib,” a co-created animation about unaccompanied child migrants in the UK, and two comics, “Abike’s Story” and “Almaz’s Story,” both of which offer firsthand accounts of modern-day slavery. It also offers some brief reflections on our 2015 comic “Fleeing into the Unknown,” which illustrates a research project—carried out by the Overseas Development Institute—on the complexities of migrant decision-making. By returning to examine our own work, we reflect on both our theory and practice as an organization in order to create a more robust praxis and consider how our work responds to broader debates about the representation of refugees, migrants, and trafficked persons. Our practice is informed not only through our experiences as an organization, but also through academic discussions of how visual storytelling and especially comics offer an opportunity to fill voids left by other forms of seeing, operating as “a form of witness that takes shape as marks and lines because no other technology could record what it depicts.”⁷ Here, we contribute to a conversation currently taking place between academics, nonprofit organizations, artists, and storytellers about how graphic narratives and collaborative, creative storytelling can best represent these stories.

“Dear Habib”: Translating Research into Visual Narratives

“Dear Habib” is a short PositiveNegatives animation depicting the true story of a young unaccompanied migrant and his life in Britain (figure 2).



Figure 2. Still image from the animation “Dear Habib,” by Majid Adin and Team Tumult (artists) © 2018. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Used with permission of PositiveNegatives.

Habib is one of the 2,500 children who arrive, alone, in the UK every year, fleeing from situations of violence and conflict. The animated narrative depicts Habib’s life in the Midlands of the UK after being forced to leave his home in Afghanistan. While he struggles to find safe housing and battles to get “Indefinite Leave to Remain” from the UK’s Home Office, he makes friends with his elderly neighbor and delights in becoming part of a new community. The animation finishes with Habib explaining that, through exchanging small acts of kindness, in which he became both giver and receiver, he began to feel at home in his new country. “Dear Habib” is part of a three-year project entitled “Becoming Adult: Conceptions of Futures and Wellbeing among Migrant Young People in the UK,” funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Co-produced by PositiveNegatives and Habib himself, the animation translates complex academic research into a visual narrative, widening the accessibility of this work by reaching out to audiences beyond academia (figure 3). Habib, whose own testimony underpins the animation, was both a participant and a researcher on the project, working with academics Dr. Elaine Chase (University College London) and Dr. Nando Sigona (the University of Birmingham) to collect further testimonies from other young migrants.

Together, their research investigated the lived experience of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), their well-being, and the ways in which they seek to realize their futures. It also compared these with the



Figure 3. Still image from the animation “Dear Habib,” by Majid Adin and Team Tumult (artists) © 2018. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Used with permission of PositiveNegatives.

UK government’s immigration and social policies which police—and often limit—the realization of UASC’s ambitions and hopes for the future. In particular, the research focused on UASC’s experience of transitioning into adulthood. This transition period is accompanied by a sudden end to support (for example, social care services and education) and greater risk of removal, despite the significant risk to the young person’s safety. “Becoming Adult” was a significant and unusual research project because of the researchers’ commitment to producing artistic outputs, including comedy, poetry, and music. These had a dual purpose, firstly investigating the influence of cultural media on young people’s decisions and actions, and, secondly, ensuring that audiences engaged with the research papers. As Drs. Chase and Sigona explain: “While Habib’s story is unique to him, it represents reality for many other refugees in our study who arrived alone as children and who face uncertainty as they become ‘adult’ in the UK.⁸ The animation beautifully captures how young people come to belong, the friendships and connections they build, and their enthusiasm to contribute to the lives of others. Our aim is to get people talking and to unsettle the policy assumptions about what *should* happen when such children turn eighteen with no legal right to remain here.”

Our academic partners here highlight how visual narratives like “Dear Habib” can interrupt the viewer’s expectations and allow them to imagine, or perhaps more accurately *visualize*, alternative structures for accommodating



Figures 4 and 5. Still image from “Dear Habib” animatic and still image from “Dear Habib” final animation, by Majid Adin and Team Tumult (artists) © 2018. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Used with permission of PositiveNegatives.

UASC once they turn eighteen. Graphic narratives which illustrate complex research can challenge the assumptions underpinning both government policies and public opinion (figures 4 and 5). “Dear Habib” not only reflects a particular reality based on Habib’s experiences, but also encourages its viewers to imagine better worlds and other possible futures for UASC in the UK.

The participants who share their stories with PositiveNegatives are at the heart of all our projects. The methodology we employ for creating visual narratives is designed to position those with lived experience as

experts on a topic. We employ a methodology which incorporates anthropological *and* participatory research with co-creation methodologies. Producing “Dear Habib” involved a bespoke co-creation process including workshops, ongoing conversations, and a constant attendance to power dynamics, cultural awareness, and creative freedom. In order to cement this process, Habib and Gul, another co-creator, were both named as creative producers in the credits of the animation. Habib, in conversation with PositiveNegatives after the production of the animation, spoke of the power of stories and their ability to represent groups not included in dominant discourses in the media: “I hope these short stories will have a positive effect on society and maybe it will make a difference in their lives. By telling my stories, I wanted to give a voice to people who experienced similar circumstances. I believe stories can be very healing and many people benefit from getting the opportunity to pass on their wisdom to others. This can be especially powerful for people who do not always feel that they have the chance to help others. Resilience is strengthened by recognizing that we are all experts in our own lives and we all have something to share with others. Another piece of this is starting to understand that words can have positive power on others.”⁹

Here, the act of storytelling allows, according to Habib, him to inhabit a wider network, comprising both the society in which he lives in the UK and others who, like him, experienced displacement as unaccompanied children. His emphasis here is not on his own healing (which is largely omitted from this reflection) but on a wider community which might become more cohesive through the exchange of stories. Julian Rappaport, a community psychologist, supports this concept and proposes that personal change and community change are not mutually exclusive—individual stories contribute to a wider community narrative and vice versa.¹⁰ Habib’s account of co-creating this visual animation—which appears complementary to Rappaport’s arguments—is that of a strengthened resilience, which he attributes to realizing that *he* is the expert in his own life narrative.

Representing Habib

Beyond the experiences and reflections of Habib himself, “Dear Habib” also highlights the complex and sensitive issues that PositiveNegatives must navigate when selecting an artist for our projects. This process changes with each iteration, but wherever possible we approach creators who have a nuanced understanding, or personal experience, of the topic at hand. The director of “Dear Habib,” Majid Adin, studied fine art at the University of Tehran and holds a Master of Arts in animation. He was

forced to leave Iran after criticizing the regime through caricatures and comics on an anonymous blog. After six months in the Calais refugee camp (known infamously as “The Jungle”), he arrived in the UK and successfully claimed asylum, later winning Elton John’s competition to direct a music video for “Rocket Man.”

Both Majid’s professional expertise as an artist working on refugee representation and his own experiences of forced displacement allowed him to animate Habib’s testimony in a way that critically and creatively engaged with the subject matter. But, as Majid himself highlights, this process of “matching” the artist with a project is not without complications: his personal connection to Habib’s story meant that he had to remind himself to recognize that “[the story] is someone’s life.”¹¹ His own connection with this narrative meant that, at times, he had to disentangle his own firsthand experiences from those of Habib. In order to develop the animation’s voice-over, Majid collaborated with voice artist Elham Ehsas, who is originally from Afghanistan, and together they introduced elements of Dari dialect into the animation.

Majid also adapted our preexisting co-creation methodologies to share skills with the people who had offered their stories for this project. After learning more about Habib and the research project, he suggested incorporating an animation skill-building element for Habib in return. Majid and his team reported the positive, rewarding nature of working on a true story with the subject themselves. Allowing us to consider how we might facilitate similar projects in the future, he explained that they would have been interested in working even more closely with Habib “to get more of his imagination, images he could give, his story.”¹²

Although “Dear Habib” reflects many of the most rewarding elements of PositiveNegatives’ flexible methodology, it also highlights the current limitations of our practice. At PositiveNegatives we generally conduct our own interviews and background research, or work with existing stories and analysis collated by our partner researchers. The “Becoming Adult” research involved in-depth longitudinal work, biographical narrative interviews, social-network mapping, and monitoring well-being outcomes. Habib was interviewed three times over a two-year period, along with a number of other participants. Creating the animation’s script was an extensive process involving PositiveNegatives researchers, artists, “Becoming Adult” researchers, and Habib himself. Together, we worked with direct excerpts from the testimony, selecting experiences which would allow the viewer to engage with Habib’s life, his beliefs, and the comprehensive research on UASC, all in under four minutes. This involved significantly editing the original transcripts from Habib’s original words: “Like, I am from Afghanistan but I am now a part of their

community. What they did for me is amazing. ... it changed my life. ... you want to support people in your community—it doesn't matter who they are. Like, I have a man living next to me and he's quite old, you know—I like go there to clean his windows and last week I have been there like cleaning his windows. ... I think that's part of being part of the community ... and it doesn't have to be big things—something like that makes you happy—and this is part of life, this is payback now, you know—helping others.”

This paragraph formed the basis for the following excerpt from the “Dear Habib” script: “Later on, when I got my first flat, my neighbour would never say hello to me. I noticed he was quite old, so one day I said, ‘Hey, if you ever need any help, please just come a knock.’ And then one day ... he did. His window was stuck or something. It was such a small thing, but he couldn't do it and he kept thanking me. But I just told him, ‘You know, a lot of people helped me.’ I think this is the way to pay back. It's about being in a community, and it doesn't have to be big things.”

These excerpts highlight the clear differences between Habib's original transcript and the animation's final script. Habib's testimony is filled with ellipses and dashes, representing pauses in his speech. Although he creates a developmental narrative on community relations in the UK, this is fragmented through brief conversational diversions. His original account is also not chronological, as he reports being included within the community and his ensuing happiness first, before explaining how and why this came about. Within the script, however, Habib's pauses and his rhetorical refrain of “you know” are replaced with a smooth, linear narrative which develops from experiencing his first home to an encounter with an unfriendly neighbor to eventual resolution. We highlight these differences to point to how the scriptwriters have crafted a progressive story which responds to, but is not a direct reflection of, Habib's words. This prompts us to ask: What is lost and gained in the process of translating an individual's firsthand experiences, and sometimes their narrative voice, for the sake of readers and viewers? By reframing Habib's story, what have we omitted from the picture?

While the editorial process which condensed the original transcript into a shorter developmental narrative was always conducted in review with Habib himself, there is a difficult, undeniable gap between the original testimony and the final animation. Our collaborative processes, which are always developing, aim to bridge this, but we acknowledge that linearity and grammatically correct English are, in many ways, an imposition on Habib's own narrative voice. Moreover, the editing of Habib's testimony is not graphically represented in the animation. Instead, these

editorial decisions highlight how, to use Agnes Woolley's phrase, representations of asylum-seekers and refugees can "cloud as much as they clarify."¹³ While a crucial task of our visual stories is to co-create intimate, firsthand accounts of global issues, the processes of creating "Dear Habib" prompt us to reconsider whose voice is ultimately prioritized in our collaborative processes. In creating personal, empathetic stories in the future, we must continue to consider the ethics of representation in these narratives. The gaps between Habib's words and the animation's script prompt us to rethink how we can traverse these distances in the future, how we might ethically mind the gap between subject and representation, and what our own role, as an organization, in the process might be.

Research and Policy Change: "Fleeing into the Unknown" and "Abike's Story"

A vital part of PositiveNegatives' portfolio consists of comics and visual stories which illustrate complex academic research for mainstream audiences. Several of these have also been used as advocacy tools to encourage changes in government policy. "Abike's Story," (figure 6), a first-person



Figure 6. Illustration from the graphic sequential story "Abike's Story," by Gabi Froden (artist) © 2015. Commissioned by the Guardian. Used with permission of PositiveNegatives.

testimony describing one woman's traumatic experiences of being trafficked from Nigeria to London, was the first of our projects to be used in this way, and was submitted to members of the UK Parliament during 2015. Created in collaboration with the Poppy Project and the *Guardian*, PositiveNegatives researched and produced "Abike's Story" to highlight the personal impact of human trafficking. Disseminated widely through the *Guardian*, "Abike's Story" was then used to humanize the policy papers which formed part of the UK's Modern-Day Slavery Act. These legislative reforms were successfully passed by the UK Parliament later that year. Communicating an individual experience, the comic highlighted the human cost of trafficking using means outside conventional metrics and statistics by illustrating a particular personal testimony.

"Abike's Story" invited policymakers to consider the experience of forced migration and abduction through the eyes of the trafficked subject—exploring how one might find oneself in this situation and what challenges one faces throughout the process. Crucially, Abike's real identity was protected throughout the creation of this comic, and we produced this visual testimony through an official mediator. The graphic narrative, made with the artist Gabi Froden, not only allows viewers to witness the immediate effects of Abike's atrocious experiences, but also invites them to consider their longer consequences. This visual story was explicitly designed to illustrate a firsthand experience of human trafficking and the long-term impact of traumatic memories. While comics scholars have discussed how graphic testimonies can trouble collective histories,¹⁴ Abike's narrative demonstrates how comics can represent traumatic memories with subtlety and nuance. Readers do not directly witness the violent acts to which Abike is subjected—seeing only disembodied faces and fragments of verbal abuse—but reconstruct these in the spaces between the panels. Through subtle visual references in Froden's drawn images, we must piece together Abike's traumatic experiences of sexual slavery.

Beyond individual experiences like Abike's, PositiveNegatives also works to illustrate large-scale research projects, making their findings accessible to broader audiences. Throughout 2016, we worked with the Overseas Development Institute, illustrating a project on the complexities of migrant decision-making. The Overseas Development Institute's report and policy brief aimed "to increase understanding of the journeys made by migrants" and "explores: the journeys migrants take; the factors that drive them; and the capacity of [the] destination country's migration policies to influence people's decisions, both before their journey begins and along the way."¹⁵ The report and policy brief, entitled *Journeys to Europe: The Role of Policy in Migrant Decision-Making*, included a comic, "Fleeing into the Unknown: A Journey from Eritrea to England," produced by

PositiveNegatives. It was based on the first-person testimony of Mehra, a woman who fled from Eritrea to the UK to escape forced conscription.

The report went on to become the Overseas Development Institute's most widely downloaded report for that year. Our comic, which illustrated the complex research within the original report, allowed audiences to understand the issue of forced migration through a single personal story. Through a sequential visual narrative, the comic tracked Mehra's interactions with people traffickers, her multiple transnational journeys, and the labyrinthine asylum process she has to navigate once she arrives in the UK. Unlike some of our other projects, this particular comic was directly aimed at enacting change at a policy level. Although we were delighted that "Fleeing into the Unknown" had reached a wide readership, this graphic first-person testimony was designed to be heard by those with the political power and cultural capital to enact meaningful change within UK migration and asylum policy.

Following this publication, PositiveNegatives' work was mentioned in a debate in the House of Lords entitled "Conflict in Fragile States" on 15 September 2016. Baroness Miller stated, "Given the rise in hate crime after Brexit, ... this is exactly the sort of material that we have a great need for. ... as long as there are failing states and a volume of refugees fleeing them, the need for this material will become ever-more crucial."¹⁶ As a result of Baroness Miller's comments, PositiveNegatives entered into conversations with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Human Rights, and we continue to explore other links within the UK Parliament. We viewed these conversations as indicative of how policymakers are increasingly open to investigating creative forms of evidence to inform their practice, and we hope to be involved in further projects of this kind in the future.

"Almaz's Story": Education and Representation

First published by the BBC, "Almaz's Story" (figure 7) follows the experience of a migrant domestic worker who was enslaved by her supposed employer after traveling from Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia. The real Almaz (whose name was changed to preserve her anonymity) was interviewed by PositiveNegatives at a women's refuge in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, during 2014. The comic depicts her appalling experiences of enslavement and sexual abuse. Through Almaz's brief encounters with other East African migrant workers, and her "owner's" references to their previous domestic slaves, the comic specifically situates this individual story within a broader context of exploitation, sexual violence, and human trafficking. The graphic abuse Almaz endures is visualized alongside more subtle



Figure 7. Page from the full comic “Almaz’s Story,” by Lindsay Pollock (artist) © 2014. Used with permission of PositiveNegatives.

reflections on home and family, the latter of which is often obscured within oversensationalized stories of exploitation. “Almaz’s Story” was released on the BBC and reached 650,000 readers in twenty-four hours. This significant readership indicates the potential reach of working with a media platform that shared one Ethiopian woman’s testimony with a global audience.

Narratively, “Almaz’s Story” reflects how graphic narratives can represent obscured or hidden histories both through their inscriptions on the page and in the gaps within the narrative. In the spaces between the panels, readers must assemble elements of Almaz’s harrowing experiences for themselves. In his pioneering study *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud highlights the importance of “the conceptual territory *between* panels.”¹⁷ This space, which McCloud explains is named “the gutter,” emphasizes how readers must navigate the gaps in order to co-create the narrative.¹⁸ The notion of the gutter is here useful for illuminating how Almaz’s abuse is often *suggested* rather than explicitly *drawn* on the page. “Almaz’s Story” refuses to reveal all, rejecting the oversaturation of images which frequently supply the ever-increasing demands of twenty-four-hour news cycles. PositiveNegatives’ comics, like this example, are designed to be hosted on major media platforms such as the BBC, yet they also invite readers to partake in a different kind of viewing and reading experience from more conventional news items. Instead, “Almaz’s Story” asks us to

witness the gaps and silences in a story which, due to the comics form, themselves become a valuable component of Almaz's testimony.

"Almaz's Story" also represents an important case study for understanding how many of our comics are, after their initial commission and co-production, used in a variety of educational settings. By considering how many of our graphic narratives could form the basis for learning resources, we respond to a plethora of recent research suggesting not only how comics can promote literacy, but also how they are "a pedagogical tool that can promote self-reflexivity and awareness of complex social issues."¹⁹ Informed by this growing body of research, the educational platform of PositiveNegatives (PosNeg Learning) has been developed to bring issues such as migration, conflict, and diaspora into classrooms across the world using graphic narratives.²⁰ The potential for meaningful reflection with these resources has been substantiated by feedback received from students and teachers who participate in our global education network. In our final reflections, we examine the experiences of one particular classroom, comprising twelve students from the American School of Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,²¹ to consider how Almaz's graphic testimony might contribute to a broader curriculum.

The pupils from the American School of Kinshasa presented a diverse set of responses to "Almaz's Story." As their feedback to us described, the comic prompted them to pursue quantitative data on the global domestic service industry and its relationship with migrant labor. Viewing Almaz as illustrative "of the millions of women, children and even men who are currently going through forms of slavery today," one student contextualized their reading through statistics on domestic workers provided by the International Labour Organization, noting that the majority of these "domestic labourers are either migrants like Almaz or have moved from rural areas in their country."²² This pupil sought out information from relevant international organizations whilst considering the human impact of slavery through one person's story, contextualizing Almaz's personal experience within a broader and increasingly well-documented phenomenon.

Others pupils used "Almaz's Story" to reflect on their emotional response to modern-day slavery, with one explaining that as "I [have] actually taken time to relate to the story," they were now concerned "that I might have witnessed such an act [of domestic slavery] without even realising what was right in front of my eyes." In this description of an adjusted gaze, the pupil explains how Almaz's graphic testimony has reconfigured their view of the world. In addition, the comic has led them to reconsider previous experiences, concerned that they, too, might become complicit in, and even a perpetrator of, modern slavery should

they fail to notice the visible signs of such practices in the future. A third student, in an essay entitled “Solving Modern Exploitation,” wrote that after reflecting “on Almaz’s story I have come up with three possible solutions” to the problem of human trafficking, including “globally approved organisations that employ the jobless,” a worldwide education system addressing the dangers of modern slavery, and “spreading the message” using further creative techniques.²³

There is a marked and obvious difference between the three students’ responses to the same comic, with the first focusing on statistics, the second offering a more emotive, personal set of reflections, and the third creating a three-point plan based on an idealized concept of global governance. Yet all of the student responses suggest the versatility and critical potential of graphic narratives when used in the classroom. Beyond creating empathy with Almaz and her traumatic experiences, these students’ responses suggest how the comic prompted them to consider solutions to global issues, allowing them to imagine pathways to alternative, better worlds. In these creative, critical responses, we locate some of the most powerful potential for our visual stories, in which they challenge new generations to consider radical solutions to global crises. “Almaz’s Story” is transformed, through these divergent readings, into a catalyst for social change, a prompt for critical self-reflection, and an illustration of mass statistics. Building on these early responses to our visual stories, PosNeg Learning has continued to co-create learning resources based on many of our projects—including “Dear Habib”—all of which are available to download and use via our website.

Conclusion

Writing on refugee comics, Rifkind discusses PositiveNegatives’ work as part of a wider comics movement “that use[s] the form to interrupt static media images with the plenitude, fragmentation and unruliness of the comics page.”²⁴ Indeed, we have watched with excitement and interest as other projects, both in the UK and abroad, have begun to use comics to represent personal stories of migration, displacement, and disaster. From collaboratively produced comics representing the experiences of Bangladeshi women in the UK to illustrated ethnographic research on communities devastated by environmental disaster,²⁵ we view our own work within a rapidly developing field. But we also temper our enthusiasm with a note of caution. As Sidonie Smith has noted, comics and graphic narratives which seek to represent migration, human rights abuses, and other global issues “often operate through apparatuses of remediation ... and thereby reproduce asymmetrical power relations.”²⁶

In other words, Smith warns that comics such as our own could potentially widen the gap between those who represent and those whose lives are represented. Our collaborative methodologies, which are constantly in development, have made significant attempts to bridge this gap. Our numerous projects, both past and ongoing, continue to question how we can best work *with* people to tell their own stories in visual form. Our dynamic processes, some of which we have outlined here, will remain in development. As we consider our own practice, we remain committed to not only fulfilling but also reimagining our mandate as an organization. In conclusion, therefore, we offer some critical reflections from the case studies offered here.

Our first reflection is that our methodologies can and must be shaped, in the future, by both lived experiences and critical nuance. This stems from an organization-wide commitment to addressing issues of underrepresentation, involving those affected by the issues that we deal with at *every* stage of the process. The origins of our participatory research methodology ground our work in human experience, applying this ethos beyond the research stage to include production, conceptual development, dissemination, and impact evaluation.

In practice, this intention manifests as a commitment to incorporating participatory methodologies such as action research, grounded theory, and human-centered design, which integrate lived experiences and insights into all phases of a project. With the facilitation of close collaborations comes an opportunity for increased skill-sharing—a model that PositiveNegatives is also increasingly exploring within its work. As piloted in our “Dear Habib” project and as outlined in this case study, we aim to explore areas in which we can, for example, develop artists’ skills in participatory research and increase participants’ creative skills.

In addition to reflecting on PositiveNegatives’ creative methodologies, we have also deeply examined how we engage with readers and the public, as amplification is central to our work. By considering how our comics are used by policymakers and taught in classrooms, we have begun to investigate how our comics are received in different settings and by different communities of audiences and readers. Although our stories have reached significant audiences across the world, and elicited meaningful feedback that they have increased understanding and empathy around certain issues, our challenge now lies with understanding how their impact might be combined to reach specific aims within our mission.

PositiveNegatives’ current and ongoing projects include working with young women living in refugee camps to co-create visual storytelling tools. These are explicitly designed to reflect on reproductive health and well-being in conflict situations. Other ongoing collaborations include

projects with Kids in Need of Defence UK to explore whether a graphic narrative could signpost undocumented teenagers living with irregular citizenship status toward existing services and support. This would primarily be an informative, destigmatizing project with specific aims and targeted beneficiaries. In these future endeavors, we will continue to demonstrate our commitment to visual storytelling as a meaningful vehicle for representing real-life stories, especially those related to migration, diaspora, and exile. Our practice and reflections here demonstrate both the enormous potential and the potentially fraught processes which define these forms of collaborative graphic life writing. Our future as an organization looks set to continue our current mandate of representing real-life stories and, as our processes for retelling and representing these personal narratives will remain constantly in development, we will be committed to expanding our participatory methods of graphic storytelling.

PositiveNegatives

Notes

1. Habib Rezaie, co-producer of “Dear Habib.” See PositiveNegatives, “Dear Habib.”
2. Dix, “Graphic Violence.”
3. Dix and Pollock, *Vanni*.
4. PositiveNegatives, “A Perilous Journey.”
5. Rifkind, “Refugee Comics,” 649.
6. Burrell and Hörschelmann, “Perilous Journeys,” 49.
7. Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 265.
8. Direct quotation provided by Dr. Elaine Chase, Senior Lecturer (UCL IOE) and Dr. Nando Sigona (University of Birmingham) 2018.
9. Direct quotation provided by Habib Rezaie, 2018.
10. Rappaport, “Empowerment Meets Narrative.”
11. Direct quotation provided by Majid Adin, 2018.
12. Ibid.
13. Woolley, *Contemporary Asylum Narratives*, 3.
14. Chute, *Disaster Drawn*; Mickwitz, *Documentary Comics*.
15. Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, *Journeys to Europe*, 3.
16. Miller, “Conflict in Fragile States.”
17. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 90–91.
18. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 66.
19. Bucher and Manning, “Bringing Graphic Novels”; Akesson and Oba, “Beyond Words,” 596.
20. See PositiveNegatives, “10 Powerful Essays.” <https://positivenegatives.org/about/education/>
21. These student essays were passed on to PositiveNegatives by permission from the teacher who delivered a lesson plan based on Almaz’s story in 2016 to pupils aged fifteen to sixteen.
22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.
24. Rifkind, "Refugee Comics," 649.
25. McNicol, "Telling"; Sou and Douglas, *After Maria*.
26. Smith, "Human Rights and Comics," 70.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Works Cited

- Akesson, Bree, and Olufunke Oba. "Beyond Words: Comics in the Social Work Classroom." *Journal of Social Work Education* 53, no. 4 (2017): 595–606.
- Bucher, Katherine T., and M. Lee Manning. "Bringing Graphic Novels into a School's Curriculum." *The Clearing House* 78, no. 2 (2004): 67–72.
- Burrell, Kathy, and Katherine Hörschelmann. "Perilous Journeys: Visualising the Racialised 'Refugee Crisis.'" *Antipode* 51, no. 1 (2019): 45–65.
- Chute, Hillary. *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics and Documentary Form*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2016.
- Dix, Benjamin. "Graphic Violence: Representing Conflict and Migration through Visual Narratives." *PhD diss.*, U of Sussex, 2016.
- Dix, Benjamin, and Lindsay Pollock. *Vanni: A Family's Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict*. Oxford: New Internationalist, 2019.
- Hagen-Zanker, Jessica, and Richard Mallett. *Journeys to Europe: The Role of Policy in Migrant Decision-Making*. London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016. <https://www.odi.org/publications/10317-journeys-europe-role-policy-migrant-decision-making>
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, NY: William Morrow, 1993.
- McNicol, Sarah. "Telling Migrant Women's Life Stories as Comics." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 9, no. 4 (2018): 279–292.
- Mickwitz, Nina. *Documentary Comics: Graphic Truth-Telling in a Skeptical Age*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Miller, Baroness. "Conflict in Fragile States." *Hansard*, vol. 774, columns 1642–1643, September 15, 2016. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2016-09-15/debates/2C78FF90-F5B8-485C-8AC0-B7836A41A6A8/ConflictInFragileStates?highlight=positivenegatives#contribution-7EEFFD87-011E-4716-B5D4-3FED25A81722>
- PositiveNegatives. "10 Powerful Essays Written by Students from the DRC." 2016. <https://positivenegatives.org/story/almaz/resources/essays/>
- . "A Perilous Journey." 2015. <https://positivenegatives.org/story/a-perilous-journey/>
- . "Abike." 2015. <https://positivenegatives.org/story/abike/>
- . "Almaz." 2014. <https://positivenegatives.org/story/almaz/>
- . "Dear Habib." 2018. <https://positivenegatives.org/story/dear-habib/>
- . "Fleeing into the Unknown." 2016. <https://positivenegatives.org/story/fleeing-into-the-unknown/>
- Rappaport, Julian. "Empowerment Meets Narrative: Listening to Stories and Creating Settings." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23, no. 5 (1995): 795–807.

- Rifkind, Candida. "Refugee Comics and Migrant Topographies." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32, no. 3 (2017): 648–654.
- Sacco, Joe. *Palestine*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 1996.
- Smith, Sidonie. "Human Rights and Comics: Autobiographical Avatars, Crisis Witnessing and Transnational Rescue Networks." In *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, edited by Michael Chaney, 61–72. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 2011.
- Sou, Gemma, and John Cei Douglas. *After Maria: Everyday Recovery from Disaster*. Manchester: U of Manchester, 2019.
- Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. London: Penguin, 2003.
- Woolley, Agnes. *Contemporary Asylum Narratives: Representing Refugees in the Twenty-First Century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.