Carnegie Mellon University

# LIFE STORIES FROM VERBAL TO VISUAL:

## PARTICIPATORY ARTS-BASED PRACTICES AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

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### Abstract:

In recent decades, the anthropology of childhood, within a context of enhanced international advocacy for the rights of children, has recast children as subjects fully worthy of study, in possession of agency, and able to interpret their social and political surroundings. Attempts at applying life story methodologies commonly used with adult subjects to children, however, have fallen short, producing an onslaught of texts that uncritically quote the child's "voice" without consideration of means of engagement nor production of these representations (James, 2007: 261). In this paper, I argue for an alternative method to the life story approach in child-focused ethnography; one that is grounded in visual participatory practices and that builds upon, but does not replicate, life story methods used with adult subjects. Drawing on ethnographic research completed with child and adult subjects in Thailand and Burma, I will make a case for participatory research methodologies that are tailored specifically to children and make visible the self-making processes through which children understand their place in the world.

## Introduction:

"Am I Karen, or am I Thai?"

The question came from Sabay, the 13-year-old daughter in the family I lived with during the eight months I spent researching along the border of Thailand and Burma (Myanmar).[1] The question was posed over dinner during my first week living in the rural outskirts of Thailand's Sangkhlaburi province and, it turned out, was one that would be posed countless times over the course of my research.

After a brief discussion, it became clear that her question held not just personal importance for Sabay individually, but would also come to impact the way in which she represented herself and was perceived within her cultural and social surroundings. Sabay's school, in a well-intentioned effort to recognize the varied ethnic backgrounds of its students, had announced earlier that day that it would institute a new policy that allowed students to forego their school uniforms each Friday and instead wear the traditional clothing of their ethnic group. For many students whose families were ethnically Thai, or who had very recently migrated to Thailand from Burma's Southeastern region, the question posed little difficulty as they hurried to buy the clothing commonly associated with each

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**1** The name Union of Burma was adopted after the British empire conquered the region during the nineteenth century. In 1989, the official name of the country was changed to Myanmar by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (who, in 1997, changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council). This article will refer to the country as Burma, the name most commonly used colloquially within the country. Similarly, the national language of the country will be referred to as "Burmese."

region: students from Thailand would wear gold-trimmed, brightly colored shirts and bottoms fashioned from traditional Thai fabrics; Burma's Karen State would wear traditional woven Karen dresses in red, white, and black; those from Burma's Mon state would wear a standard red longyi (a traditional wrap or skirt) and white top; while those from inner Burma would wear patterned longyis and buttoned shirts, like those commonly worn in Yangon, the capital city.

For Sabay, however, the question of what clothing to wear the following week at school carried additional complexities. While Sabay was ethnically Karen, as her family had left Karen State in the wake of conflict between Karen insurgents and the Burmese military, the majority of her formative years and childhood memories were situated within the geographic, social, and cultural environment of Thailand. As a result, the basic contours of her sense of self did not fit cleanly with expectations of what it meant to be "Thai," nor "Karen." While Sabay could speak both the Karen and Burmese languages, she most commonly spoke Thai, the language her school, a Thai government-run middle school, used exclusively. Her family, however, were devout Christians and attended a predominately Karen church, which represented a marked difference from her Thai peers' Buddhist upbringings. Her mother would later explain to me, "she knows that she is Karen because we have told her about where we came from and about the history of our people, but I don't think she knows how to understand being Karen when on a day-to-day basis, she feels Thai."

Whether dictating what clothes to wear to school each Friday, or how to understand her family's migration and history, Sabay's question was one of great significance. As the initial stages of my research unfolded, I quickly learned that,

for displaced children,[2] the question of how to situate a personal and familial history within a second-country context was crucial to placing themselves within the overlapping social and political spheres whose navigation is required as a part of the daily lives of those living in a second-country context. It is a question that not only signified an attempt to navigate a set of practical dilemmas regarding legal citizenship, eligibility for schooling, access to healthcare, and potential for future employment— it also represented a struggle to construct and communicate representations of self that acknowledge and simultaneously give meaning to displacement.

During the eight months that followed the evening Sabay posed her question, I undertook a study that sought to ask how displaced children develop understandings of self post-migration, with a focus on how they reconcile the complexities of being in, but not of, a second country. By focusing on themes associated with home, family, and community, I attempted to explore how displaced children strategically, though often unconsciously, connect with their home country while remaining in a new nation. Throughout the fieldwork, I was primarily interested in exploring how ethnic minority children, the majority of whom had been displaced from their homes in Burma's Karen State, constituted new understandings of self and forged new lives within their own, often shifting, social and cultural worlds.

My research was based on two key premises. First, self-making processes

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**2** The definition of the child varies widely among international organizations, regional groups and local communities. When discussing the child, this article will be referring to the UNCRC and The Hague Convention's definition of the child as every human being below the age of eighteen years. This is also the widely accepted definition of a "child" within Burma's legal system (though, see footnote 3 for a note on culturally-specific age calculation).

undertaken during childhood become more complex, and simultaneously more crucial, in the case of individuals who have experienced dramatic upheaval of family, home, and community across geographic boundaries. Second, that young people are aware of their (perhaps indeterminate) place within ethnic, social, cultural, and political paradigms; are cognizant of societal expectations and norms in a second-country context; and, work to negotiate a space within these varied delineations. Additionally, and perhaps most significantly, was a commitment to investigating the utility of participatory activities wherein research subjects themselves were invited to communicate their perspectives and perceptions via a variety of artistic media including drawing, photography, and narration.

## Research Methods and Approaches

The objectives of my research were complicated by a series of obstacles related to a lack of theoretical and methodological frameworks for approaching, accessing, and documenting the self-making process of displaced children. First, a lack of precedence posed challenges on every level theoretically: definitions referring to cases of displaced and refugee populations are notoriously contested; research on displaced populations is limited in scope, with research specifically related to displaced children even more so; and, refugee studies has only recently emerged as an academic field, meaning that frameworks for research are scarce and tend to be cross-disciplinarily disputed.

Next, methodologically, the challenges intrinsic to my proposed work were not borne out of a lack of previous study of children, but instead resulted from a belief that traditional methods of research with children, specifically in

regard to the use of the life story method, represented a missed opportunity for exploring alternative methodologies more suited to the processes by which children understand the world around them. Early in my research, I realized that, rather than conducting interviews and reproducing quotations with an expectation that this method would adequately represent the perspective of displaced children, participatory approaches would offer a means of extending processes of self-representation to my participants. This specific approach of drawing children into the research process through alternative methods, however, did suffer from a lack of extensive research and previous exploration of methods, approaches, and frameworks outside of the realms of advocacy and media.

Following a brief discussion of the theoretical obstacles that emerged within my research and the way in which I overcame them, I will introduce the primary subject of my paper: an extensive inquiry into methodological approaches to research with children, focusing on analyzing both the traditional life story method and alternative participatory practices.

## Theoretical Challenges: Definitions and Displacement

Part of the complexity of Sabay's question, and the question faced by displaced individuals regardless of age, location, or culture, is the persistent lack of clarity regarding how displaced populations are defined on a global scale. Part of this problem is tied to the fact that the term "refugee," which is the most consistently used and clearly defined label applied to displaced people, occupies a highly contested space between numerous disciplines— each proposing a different understanding of what defines a refugee. International relations, global

studies, international law, humanitarian agencies, literary and cultural studies and the social sciences have all taken stake in what has been deemed "refugee studies," each outlining a slightly specialized definition for the term (Malkki, 1995:496).

What has resulted is what Anthropologist E. Valentine Daniel calls a "thicket of interconnected vocabulary" (1996:277) as each discipline with its own "experts" advocates for a varied definition and understanding of what constitutes refugee status. Humanitarian agencies, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), place great significance on the root cause of displacement, which delineates between those who experience natural disaster or conflict-induced displacement (who are deemed "refugees") from those whose initial displacement was the result of economic pressure or pursuit (considered "economic migrants"). Also significant is a displaced individual's final destination; if an individual is displaced over a national boundary, they are considered to be a refugee, while those displaced within their country are generally referred to as "internally displaced."

As a result of these disciplinarily-specific terms and definitions, displaced individuals often experience great confusion regarding how to define their own experience of migration. A government-associated interview may present one determination in regard to their status as a refugee; a local non-governmental organization (NGO) or community-based organization (CBO) may adopt another; and local or international media may tout a third. Translation, local connotation, and cultural ramifications of terms elevate the complexities of this

new vocabulary, further blurring the definition of the refugee.[3] Thus, personal concerns of self-representation that may come with migration across regional and international boundaries are complicated by an attempt to understand self within the shifting, multidisciplinary, internationally and locally defined, global discourse surrounding the delineation of "refugee."

For the purpose of this paper, while I may use the term "refugee" in regard to the discipline of, or to refer to research associated with "refugee studies," I will refer to those participating or otherwise involved with my research as "displaced" in an effort to avoid further complicating what is already, on a local level, a complex question of definitions. In using the term "displaced," I will refer to a broader and more diverse population than that of "refugee," as, for those involved in my study, the root cause of an individuals' displacement was often tied to an interwoven set of concerns related to both situations of conflict and to economic needs and desires. Furthermore, in political and governmental arenas in Thailand, the term "refugee" carries with it a set of assumptions regarding residence in one of 9 official refugee camps or "temporary shelters"[4] spanning the Thailand-Burma border, as well as assumptions regarding completion of a registration and group status determination process— none of which were the case for the vast majority of those who participated in my study.

Finally, though perhaps most significantly, delineating between concepts such as "refugee," "internally-displaced," "externally-displaced," and "migrant," is

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**3** See Daniel on Nazif Sharani's analysis of the word "refugee" in Afghanistan, and the potential alternative of mujahirin, meaning "those who leave their homes in the cause of Allah, after suffering oppression" (1996:273).

**4** "Temporary shelters" is the Royal Thai Government term used to refer to the refugee camps along the border.

wholly irrelevant and inapt on a local level as many, if not most, of the individuals participating in my research could have fit neatly within two or more of these definitions. Participants often held identification cards or birth certificates from both Thailand and Burma, cared for multiple homes and households on opposite sides of the border, and took part in continued movement where travel across the border was not a one-time choice, but an extended process. Condeuently, given the complexity and varied characteristics of movement from place-to-place and country-to-country, I will use the general term "migration" when referring to this process, rather than employing terms such as "flight," "exile," or "escape," which each carry their own implications regarding the cause, nature, and effect of movement. This, however, is not to imply that individuals participating in my study who migrated from Burma to Thailand did not face situations of political, religious, ethnic-based, or conflict-induced strife that necessitated or forced them to leave their homes.

In addition to complexities associated with definitions, the "refugee" as an internationally recognized entity is a relatively recent development in modern history— one that Malkki calls "not yet stable," and still "in its early stages of construction" (296). The present understanding of the term "refugee," while its definition may vary, finds its roots primarily in the aftermath of the Second World War. While large migrations of people groups can be traced to the earliest histories, today's "refugee," located within a specific social category with political concerns of a global dimension, can be traced to European response and rebuilding post World War II (Daniel, 1996:271) (Malkki, 1995:494). As a result, issues associated with the "refugee" lack previous study; a problem compounded by the fact that "refugee studies" as a field only emerged in the early 1980s, when

Oxford University founded its influential Refugee Studies Programme and a significant number of new publications appeared, including the multi-disciplinary Journal of Refugee Studies and the Journal of International Refugee Law (Harrell-Bond, 1992:6) (Malkki, 1995:507).

Given that "refugee studies" as a field is relatively young, it comes as no surprise that research on studies on the effects of displacement, and these effects as unique to children, has been limited (Bek-Pedersen, Katherine and Edith Montgomery, 2006:1). Studies on displacement tend to focus heavily on adults, especially given that issues associated with, and effects of, adult migration and resettlement tend to be more concrete and quantifiable in terms of ability to gain language skill, employment, legal rights, or basic services in a second country context. The effects of displacement on children, however, tend to be more abstract, both in terms of the necessity to investigate self-making processes, and in terms of gathering content for analysis, given that children's ability to adapt to post-migration contexts is often less quantifiable than that of adults.

As a result, inquiry into realities of life for displaced children has primarily been left to media outlets and to advocacy organizations— both of which tend to focus heavily on the plight of refugee children with a goal of eliciting sympathy. Often highlighted are cases of unaccompanied or separated children, victims of trauma and war, or those with particularly inspiring or otherwise notable experiences. Media reports on displacement tend to take the form of political analysis of conflict and resulting displacement, with key issues supported by the insertion of quotes from children, though these representations consistently lack an explanation as to the manner in which quotations were gathered, edited, or reproduced.

## Methodological Challenges: Listening to Children's Voices

Issues related to the representation of displaced children and a lack of consideration regarding processes of inclusion and production within the media are a symptom of what is a larger struggle not only within media, but also within academia and, more specifically, within the field of childhood studies.

The discipline of childhood studies has, in recent decades, made a tremendous break from disciplinary trends, recasting the child as a competent interpreter of and actor within the world, rather than a passive observer. While past inquiries into childhood were formulated in pediatric, pedagogical, and developmental terms, the last four decades of the 20th century saw novel interpretations of children as agents of political, social, and cultural insight and change (Levine, 2007:248). Simultaneously, outside of academia, actions of international policymakers and activists, including the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), have raised the social status of children and ushered in a research and policy agenda focused on accessing and representing the views and perspectives of children (UNICEF, N.d.)(Bluebond-Langner and Korbin, 2007:241-42).

Out of these recent trends has come a "powerful and pervasive mantra" urging policymakers and practitioners alike to "listen to the voices of children;" a mantra that is now commonplace in political, scholarly, and popular discourse (James, 2007:261). Children are no longer considered silent witnesses, their stories are no longer overlooked, and the "mutedness" of children's voices is no longer pervasive (Hardman, 1973). Central to the conception of "children's

voices," however, are questions of representation and authenticity— and herein lies the struggle in representing children both within and beyond academia. Who represents and speaks for the categorized "child?" How do processes of production, mediation, and interpretation either quiet or amplify this "voice?" How can the "voice" or "story" of the child best be heard? As Alison James writes:

> Giving voice to children is not simply or only about letting them speak; it is about exploring the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorizing about the social world that children's perspectives can provide.
>
> (2007: 261)

James also explains that issues of representation have moved beyond "simply getting children's voices heard in the first place," and now require careful consideration of the processes by which their perspectives are collected and communicated (2007: 265). With increased access to children's perspectives and a growing understanding of their value across disciplines comes an increased responsibility to re-visit the concept of the "voice" and ask not only how this "voice" is produced and presented, but if the core concept of a "voice" — implying formal self-representation through extended speech— is in itself an effective and appropriate notion.

## The Life Story Method in Ethnographic Research:

### Introduction

Ethnography has been a preferred method of inquiry for researchers of childhood, valued for its ability to make children's views and perspectives accessible and to present "accounts that challenge many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about what children do or think" (James, 2001:264). A key or "standby" in American ethnography has historically been the life history or personal narrative, pioneered by Paul Radin in the early 20th century (Holland and Peacock, 1993:367). Self-narration, via the life story, is now considered one of the primary ways in which individuals' understanding of the world may be made visible to others. Anthropologist Ken Plummer explains that "life stories— or personal narratives— connect the inner world to the outer world, speak to the subjective and the objective, and establish the boundaries of identities (of who one is and who one is not)" (2001:395).

This feature of the life story— its ability to make visible the individual's conception of self in the context of their environment and past experiences— has ensured and propelled the use of the life story model with adult research subjects over past decades. In her 1993 work on narrative and life stories, Charlotte Linde explains that the life story is, in its most basic form and outside its use as a research method, a naturally-occurring phenomenon; its creation and revision is necessitated by oneself, regardless of whether it is ever solicited by a researcher or ethnographer (16-17). Linde proposes that the ability to tell a life story is

a "personal demand" that individuals ask of themselves and that stems from a "desire to understand our life as coherent, as making sense, as the history of a proper person" (1993:17-18). As individuals construct and communicate their personal histories through narrative, they "attempt to identify life problems, how and why they emerge, and their impact on the future" (Ochs and Capps, 1993:27).

In this way, it is clear that the process of telling a life story's primary strength lies in the fact that it is constantly in flux, shaped and re-shaped by the individual on a regular basis, regardless of whether a researcher has requested that a life story be shared. The life story is not only a vehicle for basic personal information or for the timeline of an individual's life; it does not merely communicate a series of events spanning between one's birth and present. Instead, it is a complex window into the way the individual conceives of his or her own existence and experiences.

These strengths have secured the life story's role within ethnography. It comes as no surprise, then, that the life story method and its use with adult research subjects was replicated with child subjects as, over the past four decades, interest in the study of childhood increased for anthropologists, academics, and politicians alike. While the life story has been used extensively to solicit and produce texts that claim to adequately highlight the child's "voice," the limitations of this approach are many and must be considered, especially as ethnography continues to become "a new orthodoxy in childhood research" (James, 2001:246).

## Obstacles and Limitations:

The uncritical replication with children of methods, including the life story approach, used with adults in traditional ethnography is problematic on a variety of levels. Not only does the replication of the life story method present logistical, analytical, societal, and ethical obstacles, it also places limits on the primary strength of the method and on its ability to reveal the way in which individuals conceptualize and give meaning to the contours of a life.

First, on a logistical level, the challenges of carrying out a productive interview with a child can be endless. Shyness, especially in cross-cultural contexts, and barriers of age and experience all stand in the way of completing what would traditionally be considered a "successful" interview. While conversations with adult subjects that lead to the collection of a life story can occur in a variety of contexts, whether informally over a shared meal or in an organized interview setting, the opportunities to conduct similar interviews with children are limited, if not non-existent.

Additionally on an analytical level, as Linde points out, "our implicit common-sense theories of what kind of events are likely to form part of a life story do not, in general, include the experiences of three-year-olds" (1993:24). Understood within Linde's statement, is an acknowledgement that the life story of a child will not take the form of that of an adult; child life stories feature less content (due to age, experience) and less complexity (due to developing reasoning and critical thinking skills) when compared to the life stories of adults. These limitations translate to common elements of the adult life story, including

concepts of coherence, construction, chronology and sequence, that present as indistinct within, if not absent from, the narratives of young children. Therefore, the application of narrative analysis methods commonly applied to adult life stories, many of which draw heavily on the existence of the aforementioned narrative elements, becomes almost entirely inapplicable to the child life story, leaving researchers focused on child narratives with few steps forward after a story's initial collection.

Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps point out that gathering child narratives may also present dilemmas on a societal level, given that understandings of the rights, abilities, and capacities of children vary significantly from person-to-person and community-to-community:

> In many societies, children are deemed less than competent tellers of their experiences. The right to tell can be contingent upon a formal rite of passage into adolescence … in other cases, adults may preempt children's tellings of their experiences. (1993:34)

The relationship alluded to in the passage above, between adult and child in relation to the telling of a narrative, is of significant concern. Despite recent societal and cultural shifts in understandings of children as agents in the world, Ochs and Caps point out that this change is not always reflected in interactions between child and adult that make up the fabric of day-to-day experiences (1993:35). Specifically, Ochs and Caps write that children are often rendered "overhearers" of their own experiences as adults, whether out of assumptions about a child's linguistic, conceptual, or reasoning skill, often disrupt, if not altogether silence, the child's own narrative (ibid.).

In addition to these concerns, attempts at conducting research with

children, regardless of approach, present ethical challenges in relation to an inevitable power divide between participants of a relatively young age and adult researchers. The politics of representation grow more complex when subjects are children, who are likely less powerful, more excluded, and more marginalized than adult subjects. Concerns of representation related to research with children are further heightened when questions of authenticity emerge, specifically in relation to how researchers define child subjects. James calls this a "key theoretical tension," and argues:

> [Researchers] must revisit the relationship between "childhood" as a social space, "children" as a generational category, and "the child" as an individual representative of that category and inhabitant of that space. In whatever cultural context, and in relation to any child, this relationship both defines who they are, how we as adult researchers understand them, and how they understand their own experiences. (2007:270)

James' criticism is essential to a consideration of research approaches and methodologies used with children. Replicating an approach used historically with adults not only bypasses critical conversations about who represents "the child" on both a societal and generational level, but also ignores the complex intricacy with which research processes must be designed to acknowledge and reflect what results from such discussions.

The application of life story-focused methodologies to childhood studies produces a series of dilemmas — whether logistical, analytical, cultural, or ethical— that must be considered if we are to, as James advocates, move away from the uncritical "quoting" of children's "voices," and towards processes tailored to accessing and representing children's perspectives (2007:265). Therefore, it becomes crucial to explore alternative methods that address the obstacles

inherent to the application of the life story methodology to childhood studies. Simultaneously, however, it is also essential to recognize the strengths of the life history method that should be maintained and harnessed as part of an alternative, child-specific approach more suited to the manner in which children conceive of and communicate their perceptions of the world.

## Visual Approaches to Ethnographic Research:

### Introduction

Anthropology, as a discipline, has long been preoccupied by visual representation, given that, as explained by David MacDougall, the visual "is historically related to another anthropological problem: what to do with the person" (1997:276). The person, as the primary subject of early anthropologists' attention, was initially left invisible to anthropological and academic audiences until, as an early solution to the subjects' formlessness, exotic peoples were brought to lectures, museums, and events (ibid.). When transportation of a physical person was impossible, drawings often depicted the person of interest participating in ceremonies or completing daily tasks. With the emergence of photography in the 19th century, however, came a simpler, and more logistically-sound option for providing anthropological audiences with visual representations of the subjects of field-based research (MacDougall, 1997:277).

As anthropology continued to develop within a colonial context and, simultaneously, anthropologists became increasingly interested in social and biological evolution, photography became a primary method of documenting the physical characteristics of individuals and groups, and allowed for classification and organization of society by types (Banks, 2007:25). Most notable among those employing what is now called "anthropometric photography" was Thomas Henry Huxley who developed a process for photographing colonial subjects throughout the British Empire with a goal of comparing the resulting

photographic data morphologically (Banks, 2007:26). Underpinning these methods was an assumption that the visual, as represented in a photograph, provided undeniable proof regarding the status of bodily morphology, dress and cultural characteristics associated with inner sociological truths. By the late 19th century, however, this assumption was called into question, most significantly in the case of a series of Huxley's photographs that depicted various "types" or castes in British India (Banks, 2007:27). Rather than producing a foolproof definition of the caste system in India, Huxley's photographs fueled competing European interpretations of the Indian caste, with the same images being deployed by advocates of conflicting views who claimed they depicted the "truth" of the caste system (ibid).

This tension, between the perceived failure of the image to be "objective, systematic, and scientific" and its contemporary status as "inherently partial— committed and incomplete," has dramatically affected the ways in which anthropologists understand the role of visual documentation in the discipline (Collier and Collier, 1986) (Clifford, 1986). Closely tied to this tension is the "crisis in representation" that emerged in the 1980s within the Western disciplines, which resulted in anthropology's poststructuralist and critical postmodern approaches to concepts of representation, subjectivity, and knowledge creation (Bloustien, 2003:3). Today, as a result of both shifts in understanding, it is generally understood that the photograph "creates an immediate paradox, for although the camera seems to blur the distinction between the represented and the representation, we also know it can be used creatively to construct new images" (Bloustien, 2003:2). The photograph is not now, nor has it ever been, simply a means of recording reality; rather "it occupies

a fascinating, multi-vocal and contradictory role," as has been made clear in past decades as visual media has been taken up and appropriated by those previously relegated to the role of "subject" (ibid).

However, with an understanding of the complex role of photography and visual media in framing, interpreting, representing, and redefining reality comes an awareness of the visual's increasingly indeterminate position within anthropological frameworks and, more broadly, within the discipline. As David MacDougall famously wrote, "anthropology has had no lack of interest in the visual, its problem has always been what to do with it" (1997:276). He continues, commenting, "early interest in visual anthropology, which began with such enthusiasm, gradually faded into perplexity" (ibid). Despite the fact that visual elements have become interwoven within the anthropological approach, this perplexity ensues, especially given the fact that relatively little has been written about how best to collect, analyze, and interpret visual images (Bloustien, 2003:2). While, in the last three decades, activities in visual anthropology have been increasing in number and expanding in new directions— whether related to indigenous media, imperfect media, participatory visual projects, or multimedia and web-based content, among others— anthropologists continue to operate with little disciplinary structure or support regarding the use of visual materials in research.

# A Case Study of Visual Participatory Practices in Ethnographic Research:

## Introduction

In order to begin to answer MacDougall's question regarding the visual and, more specifically, how it can enhance, transform, and build upon traditional ethnographic methodologies including the life story model, I will present a case study drawn from fieldwork completed in the border region between Thailand and Burma between June and December 2011, during which I explored how children like Sabay work to form new understandings of self amidst shifting geographic, cultural, political, and societal contexts.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was primarily interested in investigating the ways in which displaced young children simultaneously constituted and represented their own sense of self in the face of conflicting depictions and understandings related to geography, ethnicity, nationalism, and class, among others. My primary aim was to explore how ethnic minority children constituted new understandings of self while connecting with their own histories and, as a result, forged new lives within their own social and cultural worlds.

## Methodology and Theoretical Approach

I proposed to conduct my research with a primary study group made

up of sixteen secondary school students, ages 8-16[5], all of whom had been displaced from their homes in Karen state. Half of the group had, at the time of my research, been displaced across a national boundary into Thailand and half had been displaced across the regional and ethnic border delineating Burma's Karen and Mon States. The portion of the Thailand-Burma border region that contains both research locations lies approximately three hundred and fifty kilometers northwest of Bangkok, and two hundred kilometers north of the Thai provincial capital of Kanchanaburi. The region is considered one of the remaining "wild west" outposts of Thailand, where the Royal Thai Army, ethnic insurgents, democratic revolutionaries, warlords, and refugees all grapple over resources and recognition (South, 2003).

The fluidity of the region, and its populace, led me to embrace a multi-sited research process that was originally advocated for by anthropologist George E. Marcus (1995). Marcus called for a "mobile" ethnography that "takes unexpected trajectories in tracing cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity" (96). Marcus' argument, which focuses primarily on the limitations of a local, close-up, single-sited ethnography, proposes a mode of ethnographic construction through which researchers could "follow the story," meaning "reading for the plot and then testing this against the reality of ethnographic investigation that constructs its sites according to a compelling narrative" (109).

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**5** In Burma, a child is considered to be 18 years of age if they have reached their seventeenth birthday (age is rounded up). Therefore, if a child is considered to be 18 years old in Burma, they would be 17 years of age if calculated by Western standards. All ages presented in this research have been calculated by Burma's standards- therefore, individuals listed as age 18 still fall under the category of children, and were still eligible to participate in this study.

After arriving in the region and conducting basic interviews, I became aware of the fact that the majority of my soon-to-be subjects and their families were spread across a series of small towns on both sides of the border, all of which were inextricably linked by familial ties, economic production, and communal cooperation. At least two families participating in this study had immediate family members residing in both of my research locations, as it is not uncommon for families living in villages in Burma to send school-age children to better-equipped Thai schools in the Sangkhlaburi District and young adults to the prospering system of undocumented and illegal labor stemming across the border between the two towns. Regardless of specific motivations for migration, both locations may be considered "home" during any given point of an individual's migration. This multi-sited, cyclical nature of my subjects' experiences, which continued to echo throughout conversations, combined with the availability of resources such as willing partner organizations, directed my selection of research sites and decision to avoid choosing to base my research at only one location.

Upon arriving at both research locations and engaging with the children who would later become my research participants, however, I came to the realization that this proposed focus was more complex than I had initially expected. Gathering basic details such as children's names and ages was nearly impossible, and often required participation by a schoolteacher or administrator who would act as an intermediary, drawing out whispered responses from children too shy to speak directly to me. It became clear to me that, if one-word responses of names and ages were so hesitantly given, conversations related to my primary research interests of self-making and self-negotiation would be unlikely to emerge.

Rethinking my research approach after these early encounters, I came to the conclusion that an alternative method would be necessary and that traditional interview-dependent approaches I had been introduced to throughout my studies, including that of the life story model, could play only a marginal role within my current research. Also clear was that any alternative approach must be borne out of a context and environment that fostered not only familiarity, but also security for my child subjects. Any activities included should be those that were either a part of their daily lives already, or were a natural extension of common tasks and events.

After conversations with schoolteachers and others in the communities in which I had proposed to research, the visual arts, as a natural extension of the children's art classes in school, emerged as a possible alternative point of entry. Arts-based participatory workshops could include not only a set of activities, such as drawing and painting with which my participants were already familiar, but workshop sessions could also be scheduled as a temporary replacement for the creative arts opportunities children were already offered via their local schools, either within class time or as an after-school activity. As a result, I built relationships with two schools, one in each research location.

In Burma, I worked with a small school created specifically to provide educational opportunities for displaced children in the area. The school was built in 2005, providing basic education for Grades 1 to 5, and in 2010, was expanded to include Grade 6. Currently, the school has approximately 200 students in attendance, a number that has risen in the past five years due to post-election instability. The eight primary research participants in the Burma-based research location were all housed in an on-site boarding home and were beginning their

Grade 6 studies.

In Thailand, I worked closely with a boarding home for children, primarily those migrating from Karen State, who were attending a local Thai school. The boarding home was originally founded in the spring of 2006 and eventually began functioning primarily as a boarding house for the nearby Thai school, as groups of children from Burma arrived to seek education in Thailand. Currently, 28 children live in the house, all attending the local Thai school. The eight primary research subjects I worked with were studying in Grades 3-7, a span which did not necessarily correlate with their ages given that admission to each grade level is based heavily on the student's Thai language skills and previous access to education in Burma.

In addition to the utility of the visual arts as an effective entry point in relation to my primary topic of interest regarding how displaced children conceptualize and communicate identities in a post-migration context, the use of visual media seemed likely to hold great theoretical significance and relevance. Closely tied to the process of self-understanding is that of representation, as practices of visual representation, and specifically self-representation, manifest as a visible, external reflection of an invisible, internal process of self-making. In this way, visual media, and more specifically, photography, can be used for "personal reflexivity— a way of seeing ourselves as we think others see us, or of reinventing ourselves the way we would like to be seen" (Bloustien, 2003:2). This results in an image that, not unlike those created by Huxley over a century ago, cannot be understood as either objective or factual. Rather, the photograph, and specifically the self-portrait, as Roland Barthes has argued, "is an advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity… I am neither a subject nor

object but a subject who feels he is becoming object" (1981: 12-14).

In this way, photography, like the life story research method, is both a tool in, and outcome of, processes of creating and constituting an understanding of self. While this concept of the photo as both process and product has not seen a wide application, a recent study by Gerry Bloustien and Sarah Baker does represent a significant attempt to apply photography both to the concept of self-making, and to research with young people. Bloustien and Baker's 2003 paper explores "self-making" among children and adolescents in their research on the "micro worlds" of young girls in South Australia (67). Using what they call "auto visual-ethnographic" processes, the authors elicited visual media and audio recordings from research subjects with a goal of investigating how young people constitute and represent their own sense of self (66). Drawing from Taussig's insights on mimesis (1987; 1993), Bloustien and Baker argue that the production of photographic images, similarly to that of personal narratives, has become "a way of overcoming fear or uncertainty, of regaining control by becoming other" (2003:70). They continue, writing:

> We see this in our eagerness to photograph and to record ourselves where, through our images, we often test out our possible selves, exploring the 'me' who is both like you and distinct from you; a self who is both me and not me at the same time. (2003:70)

Bloustien and Baker continue to explain how, through image creation, their young subjects not only utilized the camera to interrogate and question their individual identities, but also to "confirm [their] narrative of identity and momentarily make concrete that elusive sense of 'the real me'" (2003:75).

In their conclusion, Bloustien and Baker make a strong argument for the

power of visual methodological tools to not only provide children and young adults an opportunity to "express, explore, and represent" themselves, but also as a way to explore and communicate possible future identities (2003: 76). Through visual representation, Bloustien and Baker's subjects struggled to create coherent representations of self in a manner that bears great similarity to how a sense of self is expressed through the creation of a life story narrative. While Bloustien and Baker's visual methodology varies in many significant ways from the traditional life story process, both work to access and make visible (whether verbally or visually) the internal understanding of an individual's life experiences. Both processes create a physical form of an otherwise invisible psychological process and open a dialogue about conceptions of self, the results of which are not only utilized academically by the researcher, but also personally within society-at-large. The ways in which visual methodologies address and improve upon the limitations of the life story model will be discussed in detail in the following pages, but what is significant about Bloustien and Baker's work is their ability to approach the questions of narrative creation and self-representation that have been traditionally accessed by the life story approach.

## Analysis

Having determined that the logistical framing of arts-based research as a part of the children's pre-existing schedule revealed itself as a particularly worthwhile and effective approach (as did the theoretical ties between image creation and self-representation), I was nevertheless quickly led back to MacDougall's question of what can be done with the visual and, additionally, how

the use of the visual interacts with more traditional (predominantly non-visual) research methods. There remains a lack of disciplinary frameworks regarding the use of the visual within anthropological and, more specifically, ethnographic research- much less among research related to displaced populations. The ways in which visual methodologies may be used with children has received even less attention and, furthermore, identification of where these approaches fit within, or perhaps can replace, adult-focused methodologies, also remains relatively untouched by the academic community.

It is clear, however, that both the life history model and the use of visual ethnographic processes, as explored by Bloustien and Baker, occupy significant and, as I will argue, potentially parallel roles within the research of self-making among adults and children, respectively. It is also clear that, lacking a disciplinary framework of its own, the prospects for the use of photography in research may benefit greatly from comparison and analysis to another research method and, simultaneously, a pre-existing and accepted framework and methodological approach. In order to further explore the ways in which these two processes intersect and diverge within ethnographic research, I will, in the following pages, present the results of research with both child and adult participants of my study.

With adults, the life-story method was utilized while, with children, a series of arts-based participatory workshops were conducted which, like the life story model, aimed to foster communication and discussion around issues of self and self-making in the context of migration.[6] With child subjects, cameras, crayons, and paints, as research tools, were paired with opportunities for research

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**6** For further details regarding methodological approach, see page 54.

subjects to caption their images, either verbally or in writing (Fig. 1.1). Subjects also met in small groups to discuss and present their ideas and images both before and after photography sessions (Fig. 1.2). In this multi-layered process, the significance of subjects' responses was not limited solely to photographic images. Instead, like an additional layer over the images, were the explanations expressed through interviews, written narratives, and discussions.

## Outcomes

In order to best explore these results, their related convergences and divergences, and their utility within each associated age group, I will present a portion of selected, unedited[7] results of both methodologies. An example of the results of one methodology will be paired with that of the other with a goal of explaining how common features of the adult life story, and more specifically, the migration story, may be accessed through participatory arts-based methodologies. Extended analysis, however, will be reserved primarily for the results of participatory workshops, as a number of extensive frameworks are already in place for the analysis of the adult life story narrative whereas few strategies exist for the analysis of visual practices and their results.

The following section explores the way in which self-making processes and conceptions of self traditionally collected via the adult life story narrative may also be accessed through visual participatory practices. More specifically, I

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**7** Informants' names have been withheld for confidentiality reasons, and false names have been given to each individual participating. Migration details, village names, or other specific information that could be used to identify a student was removed from all images, and deleted from any written narrative or caption.

will highlight significant features of the adult life story as present in the culturally-bound migration narratives of adult informants. Analysis will be extended to the visual results of participatory workshops conducted with children, specifically highlighting the way crucial components of the adult life stories are expressed and accessed through the children's visual images. Finally, an additional section will revisit the obstacles to the application of life story methodologies to children introduced earlier in this piece and, countering these limitations, make a case for the use of participatory arts methodologies. Arguing that the use of these visual methodologies is advantageous when compared to the replication of the life story methodology with children, I will present the ways in which participatory arts-based methodologies begin to address, if not circumvent, these obstacles.

Selected Life Stories:

*Name: Cho Cho Aung*
*Age: 43*
*Location: Sangkhlaburi District, Thailand*

I was born in a village near Ye Township in the jungle of Burma. I was an only child. I stayed in this village with my mother, helping her at the house until she died. Since I had no brothers or sisters, and after that no mother, I decided to go to help my grandparents with their farmland. Even after I married, I continued to stay there on the land and help them because the farmland was to be my inheritance once they died.

We continued to work on this land until, one day, the military came for my husband. It is not uncommon for this to happen to villagers because all Karen people are suspected of being connected to the Karen National Union forces. The Burmese military took him and imprisoned him in the military camp nearby our land. He listened to his imprisoners, and eventually discovered that they thought he was spying for the KNU and intended to kill him. He knew, then, that he needed to run away as soon as possible. He took the next opportunity he could, which came when he was accompanying the soldiers on patrol around the camp. Walking behind them, he paused, saying he had to go to the bathroom, then ran off the path and rolled down a hill into a deep valley.

He returned home after his escape, but was hurt very badly and was hallucinating with fever. Once he got well, we left because we were afraid to stay in the village because there was nothing we could say to explain what had happened. Even today we cannot return to reclaim our inheritance.

When we left, we ran through the jungle into Thailand, bringing along our three children who had been born in Burma. It was a difficult journey and we had no money at all, so we had to depend on people we knew who could offer us places to sleep and food to eat. Even after we arrived and began day labor on a nearby plantation, we were still scared and never had a stable home. We couldn't find regular jobs because we had no documentation, no legal right to work in Thailand, not even birth certificates. We traveled back and forth between villages in Burma and towns in Thailand to find work, and each time we moved, we had to carry everything with us from place to place. This was most difficult in the rainy season. During that time, some of the children were too young to walk, so

my husband had to carry one under each arm and one on his back, while I carried our belongings. Each time we move it takes 6 or 7 days because we have small children and cannot travel quickly.

We spent many years like this, running back and forth and searching for ways to earn enough money to survive. Everywhere we go, we were cheated and bosses always stole our money or took advantage of our vulnerability. After these years, we eventually settled in Thailand and paid for our legal documentation to be forged. Even with papers, life is still hard. I have seven children now, and a heart problem, which means I cannot do hard labor. My husband is a construction worker, but the people who hire him often refuse to pay, or his manager runs away with the money. We still have nowhere permanent to live, and must share a one-family house with two other families.

Since we have arrived, it has been very hard to live in Thailand, but it is also automatically better to live here, no matter what, because our lives were in danger in Burma. It is safer here. My aunt always told me that I should never trust anyone who told me to return to Burma because we can never trust that the military won't come back for my husband or our children.

There are things that are difficult here. We cannot pay for the children to go to school. We are cheated a lot because we come from Burma and are not Thai. But, at least here, our children have a chance to go to school one day. We can also get dependable jobs here too. In this way, it is better here. What I think is, that if a family really cannot stay in Burma, then they should come to Thailand. But, if they have a choice and can stay, they should. Burma is still our home; we just cannot live there.

*Name: Thu Lay*
*Age: 21*
*Location: Sangkhlaburi District, Thailand*

I was born in a small village in Mon State, Burma. I was the last of six children and younger than the rest, so my father wanted to send me to live in Three Pagodas Pass because he believed that I was not his son. I moved between an adoptive household in Three Pagodas Pass and my birth mother's home in Mon State throughout my childhood. When I was fourteen years old, however, I decided to run away. I snuck onto a train to Yangon from my township. After I arrived, however, I realized I didn't know anyone and ended up returning after I ran out of money. I have no real family, but I know two of my older brothers are working in Thailand, and I had heard that I could make money there.

At first, I tried to walk to Thailand, but I didn't realize that you can't just walk into another country. I was stopped at the checkpoint and they told me to turn around, so I found some nearby homes a few meters away from the border and stayed there until the morning. I awoke and left at 7 am, when I walked to Thailand farther away from the checkpoint. No one stopped me, so I kept walking until I arrived in a border town, around 5 pm. The night I arrived here, I did nothing except for walking around and around the market. I was so hungry, but I couldn't find food to eat anywhere. I tried to go to sleep, but even though I was tired from walking all day, I couldn't sleep because of the hunger. Instead of sleeping, I walked around town all night hoping to find something to eat.

When morning came, I walked to the market again and asked for food at a rice shop. They saw that I was hungry and fed me for free. Once I had eaten, I realized I had no idea what to do. I could not speak Thai, and I was so afraid to even look for work in Thailand. I didn't want to get into trouble. I began to think maybe it would be best to just go back to Burma. Eventually, though, I felt better after eating and I was able to go look for a job.

The first job I was offered was a job washing cars and buses at the bus station in town. They told me that they would pay me 600 baht ($20.00) per month I worked. I worked there for four months, because I didn't realize how little money that was. I didn't realize they were cheating me because I didn't speak Thai. To the Thai boys, who are also poor and need a job, they usually pay 1,200 baht ($40.00), so they were only paying me half of that because I was Burmese.

After that, I was frustrated and tried to find a new job. I found one working at a hotel near a hospital. Later, I decided to try to become one of the guides who walks people through the jungle and into Thailand. I began walking one group of people through the jungle, and once we got near town, I hired them motorbike taxis to take them the rest of the way into Thailand. But, I only do this work for one month because people cheat me so often. Most of the time they don't have the money to pay in full. I tell them it costs 1,300 baht, but they don't pay me once they arrive in Thailand.

I have had many problems, so I have to work many jobs and always find new ones. I used to miss my mother a lot, and I still do, but that seems like a small problem in comparison to my other problems. My biggest problem though is trying to find good, fair jobs. For me, I never choose any of my own work like most people do. It is often hard to find work, but I know eventually I will find something because I never turn a job away. The other big problem for me is education. I used to see other children going

to school, and I always wished that I could go too. I want to go very much, but I know I cannot because I have no money and I need to work. For people my age, they should not come here because it will be difficult to get a job or even to go to school, especially if they don't know anyone. That is most important, if a young person wants to go to a town, but doesn't know anyone there, they should not go. But if they know someone, then it is okay to go. But for me, it is now okay, because even though I face many problems, here at least I have a dream. One day I hope to graduate from the adult school and get a stable job in a supermarket or other store so I don't have to move from job to job any longer.

Fig. 1.1

Author

Fig. 1.2

Author

**Fig. 2.1**

"This is my house on the right, in the village where I am from in Burma. We grow rice, and also trees there. We had to leave the fields when we came here."

Saw Htoo

**Fig. 2.2**

"This is me in the village where I am from in Burma. You can see the different houses that my relatives all live in, the water nearby, and the natural surroundings."

Thinn Thinn

**Fig. 2.3**

"This is the village I am from. There is a house and a school and church nearby in the village. There is also a tree with a bench where I like to sit."

Saw Htoo

**Fig. 2.4**

"This is my home. The pink building is the school I used to go to before I had to leave- you can see the teacher and the students. The yellow house is the house of my grandmother, who I went to live with until my grandfather became sick. Outside you can see her chicken and my black pig that I had to leave there. At the top is the lake where we swim."

Thinn Thinn

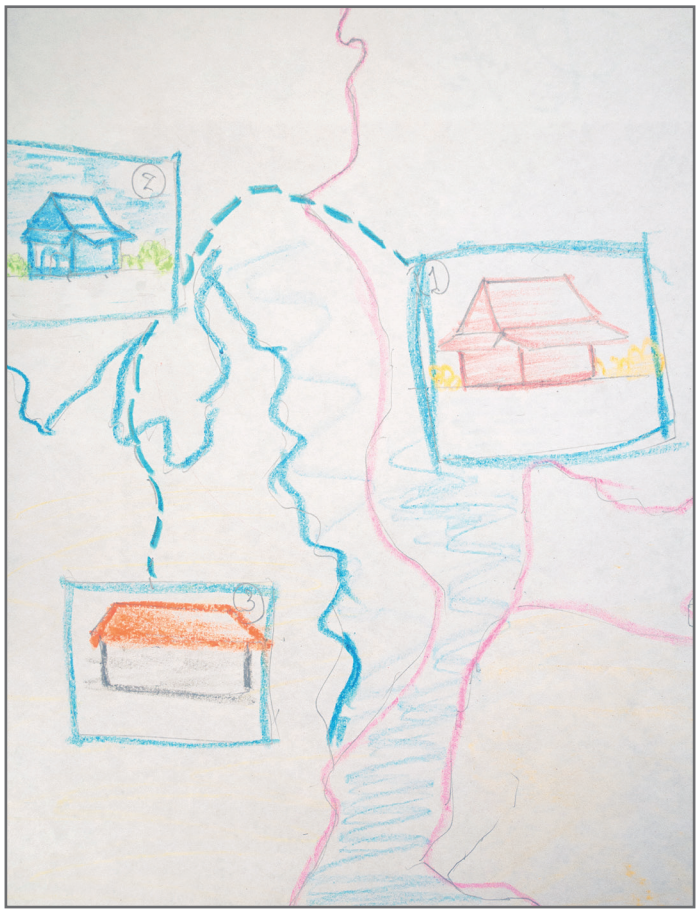

**Fig. 2.5**

"Here you can see all of the different places where I have lived. Some are in Thailand and some are in Burma. In the first two places, I lived in houses with my family-houses like the one I had in Burma. But now, in the third place, I live at this boarding house."

Saw Htoo

**Fig. 2.6**

"I was born with my parents in Burma, but when I was younger, they sent me to live with my grandparents in another village. But then, what happened was that my grandfather got very sick so I had to leave. I was very sad, but I came to stay here and go to school in Thailand. That is why there are so many children outside the last house. On the side you can see my parents, who are living away from me"

Thinn Thinn

**Fig. 3.1**

"This is my friend's house, and my friend's brother. But, it makes me miss my house very much because it seems like my home."

Gee

**Fig. 3.2**

"This house is very beautiful like the house I lived in before. It makes me miss my house, but it is not like my house."

Ipo

**Fig. 3.3**

"This picture is the picture that I like very much. It reminds me of home, so I like it because I miss my mother and my home."

Somchai

**Fig. 3.4**

"There is something about the house in this photo. In this photo is a mother's bed, and a son's bed next to it. The beds look so good to sleep in. This is the Karen style."

Khin Soe Oo

**Fig. 3.5**

Khin Soe Oo

**Fig. 3.6**

"I like this picture because it makes me miss my house. But it feels good to look at it."

Jao

**Fig. 3.7**

"In this photo, a mother is washing her child's clothing. This photo is like my mother washing my clothing, in my house in Burma. So, I like it very much. The love of all mothers is so meaningful."

Khin Soe Oo

*Life Stories and Participatory Practices: Parallels and Divergences*

At its most basic level, the life story is a means of organizing and presenting the basic components that come together to form a life. According to Cortazzi, life stories are, generally, "highly structured, reportable ways of talking about the past with an understood chronology" (2001:384). Several key features have been identified as commonly incorporated into the life story, including: plot, meaning a dynamic tension which moves the story on; sequence, referring to the presence of a beginning, middle, and end; epiphany, or a major tension or crisis the narrative is organized around; and nuclear episodes, defined as specific autobiographical events that assume a privileged status in the story (Plummer, 2001:399).

The life stories above, which I will refer to as "migration narratives," represent a specific subset of life stories in that they conform to the definition of a life story, but place special emphasis on a situation in which migration occurs. This is significant in that migration narratives contain certain common characteristics within and beyond those defined in Plummer's definition. For example, within the migration narratives I collected, the aforementioned "beginning" tends to take the form of a description of life pre-migration, the "middle" becomes an account of the act of migration, and the "end" generally describes a period of transition and adaptation to a next environment. The act of migration and the circumstances surrounding and often causing it, commonly present as the epiphany. Lastly, nuclear episodes tend to describe either a specific event and struggles both pre-migration and post-migration, including the teller's circumstances from departure from their village or origin to post-migration attempts to attain a home, a job, or

other necessities sacrificed during a period of displacement.

These characteristics and commonalities were present in all life stories or migration narratives collected throughout my fieldwork and, more significantly for this analysis, in the two stories above. Both migration narratives fall within Cortazzi's criteria, being highly structured, reportable ways of talking about the past and also presenting with a distinct chronology. In both cases, this chronology followed a structure of describing their situation pre-migration, followed by an account of the act of migration, and finally a description of their circumstances post-migration. Both stories began with birth and provided a description of the basic contours of one's early life, including their home village or township and family members. The narratives then progressed to introducing and describing the situation that would eventually result in flight, before then describing, in detail, the act of migration. Perhaps most significant is the way in which both stories, as well as all others I collected, seem to verbally focus on the characteristics of migration, presenting a day-by-day if not hour-by-hour description of how they moved from one country to the other. Finally, this explanation of migration is followed by a briefer, more general summary of the challenges endured and successes achieved post-migration.

Having identified and highlighted the common features of the adult life story and, more specifically, the adult migration narrative, the question becomes how these characteristics emerge within the results of visual participatory workshops conducted with displaced children. While it is undoubtedly difficult, if not impossible, to create one image that presents the same information presented in a single adult life story, it is possible to find related content within a set or series of images. In order to explore the way in which a migration narrative is formed

though the creation of multiple images, I will present a series of images produced by two children participating in the workshops. Each image presented here was captioned (Fig. 1.1) after it was created or captured during a period of free "play" (Fig. 1.2).

The first two photos and their respective captions (Fig. 2.1, Fig. 2.2) were drawn as an introduction activity during the first day of the participatory arts workshops, where the form of each child's migration narrative begins to take shape. The drawings themselves, along with the captions that provide additional detail, present an image similar to that crafted verbally by adult participants during the first sentences of their life stories. In the same way that statements, "I was born in a small village in Mon State, Burma" and "I was born in a village near Ye Township in the jungle of Burma," work to place the present embodiment of the person speaking into a past context geographically, historically, and distant from the present, so too do the children's images place them within the context of their origin location. In all the drawings children produced depicting themselves in their villages or cities of origin, all participants, whether age 5 or 18, drew themselves as they looked at the present time, often even wearing the same clothing they wore when drawing the picture. This fact—that, regardless of age of first flight from their village of origin, all participants placed themselves, drawn as they were at present, within the frame of a distant place— is significant in that, in the same way the first few lines of the adult life narrative works to bridge present and past, and place the individual post-migration into a context and environment pre-migration, so too do the children's images.

These images also form the contours of what presents as the "beginning" portion of the adult narratives, building an initial environment from which the

migration narrative will build. Just as adult participants describe the context of their early lives and childhood surroundings, the children's images also open a means of accessing the details regarding location of origin. Additional drawings, created at a later date (Fig. 2.3, Fig. 2.4), add context and detail to what would be considered the "beginning" of the adult life story. Fig. 2.4, for instance, provides details parallel to those presented in the initial paragraphs of Cho Cho Aung's migration narrative. Both Cho Cho Aung's story and Thinn Thinn's image introduce relevant details that will be significant in their later migration narrative, outlining not only the context from which each individual would flee, but also the relationship between themselves and those they would either flee with or leave behind. Cho Cho Aung's story depicts her movement from her parents' house to her grandparents' farm and details her relationship with her husband, who will continue to play a role within the unfolding narrative. Similarly, Thinn Thinn's drawing also depicts the relevant details of her life pre-migration, describing her transition to living with her grandparents.

Child participants' attempts to draw their path of flight or, as referenced earlier, "act of migration," took different forms. Fig. 2.5 and Fig. 2.6 show two different strategies that were most commonly used by child participants to respond to a discussion related to the children's experiences moving from Burma to Thailand. Fig. 2.5 presents a map-like image of the border region that shows, geographically, the different locations where Saw Htoo and his family lived during the process of moving between their village of origin and his current location in Thailand. Added to this map, however, are snapshot-like images of each place the family called home throughout the process. This ability to place individual geographic locations and detailed circumstances within a larger path and process

of migration is complex and mirrors the way in which adults, in their migration narratives, described each location as a part of the whole, placing significance not on each individual moment, but on the broader objective of finding a final location where they, and their families, could live stably and rebuild the lives they had maintained previously.

The second strategy of depicting the process of migration, as shown in Thinn Thinn's drawing (Fig. 2.6), was to draw individual locations from a birds-eye-view perspective allowing representation of each place of refuge as well as its relationship to the wider migration path. What stands out in Thinn Thinn's drawing and accompanying description is her inclusion of her companions. Each location in her image shows, standing nearby, the people with whom Thinn Thinn and her brother either took refuge or migrated alongside. Like Cho Cho Aung's narrative, which consistently references the situation of her husband and children, Thinn Thinn's image and narrative also places great significance on the changing relationships between herself and the others around her. Finally, both child participants' drawings not only reveal details about their migration narrative, but also feature their current location, thus providing a conclusion or end to their path.

Nuclear events are perhaps most clearly represented within the way children conceive of and present the circumstances of their migration. An initial theory may be that this is related to the way in which children perceive the world around them and the events that make up their life experiences. Details regarding nuclear events are either directly depicted in the images themselves, or indirectly referenced within Thinn Thinn's descriptions of her drawings, if not both. The difficulties associated with leaving, from having to withdraw from her school and

leave her classmates to her inability to bring her pet pig along on the journey (Fig. 2.4), are specifically drawn in the image and explained through captions. Thinn Thinn continues her representation of her struggle (Fig. 2.6), by representing her current living situation as one of many students staying in a boarding home, far from their parents who Thinn Thinn represents standing at a distance from herself and her companions. While perhaps less vivid, Saw Htoo's images also highlight particular events or challenges that stand out amongst others in his memory. His reference to his family having to leave their village's fields in the caption accompanying Fig. 2.1, for instance, points to the difficulties associated with leaving his home village and his family's source of income.

While it is possible to identify many more cases where content provided by adults through the telling of a life story parallels content provided by children either through drawings or accompanying captions, this analysis only represents a limited set of results from a larger body of work. By highlighting two distinct adult stories and two sets of images each created by one child participant, it becomes evident that similar results can emerge from disparate sources and methods of inquiry. The significance in this finding lies in the fact that an alternative research approach does not equate to the sacrifice of key information, nor does it necessarily necessitate an entirely new framework unrelated to other methods of inquiry.

A key element of the life story and, I argue, the visual image, are these representations' connection to a complex process of self-making and the creation of an understanding of self as a part of a larger narrative. Both the life story and the visual image have the potential to become "simultaneous creators and creatures" of self, as individuals work to build an understanding of life's experiences,

imposing order on otherwise disconnected experiences (Holland and Peacock, 1993:374).

These strategies of self-representation, and the processes of personal understanding they reveal, are especially relevant in the case of those who have experienced a fissure within their anticipated narrative, whether due to illness (Kleinman, 1998), war (Langer, 1991), addiction (Cain, 1991), or any one of a number of potentially traumatic events. Specifically in regard to the life story, it has been theorized that, when coping with unexpected and often unavoidable events, the process of telling a life story allows individuals to create an explanation that harmonizes resulting discrepancies into a semblance of meaning. Ochs and Capps call narrative activity "crucial to recognizing and integrating repressed and alienated selves" (1993:29). They go on to explain the relation of the life story to a variety of psychological conditions, including posttraumatic stress disorder, writing that, "many therapeutic interventions strive to develop a narrative that articulates the dissociated events and reconciles them with subsequent past, present, and future selves" (ibid.). As Charlotte Linde writes:

> We can become aware of the personal demand for coherence in situations where some new event has happened that we do not know how to form into narrative, since it does not seem to fit into our current life story. We can observe a great deal of confusion and uneasiness until we somehow make the new event fit into the ongoing story. (1993:17-18)

This sense of uneasiness, introduced by Linde, has been explored extensively by others who have applied the concept to various cases of trauma or fissure within the life course. Writing about the narratives of victims of the Holocaust, Lawrence L. Langer conceives of this dilemma as a "temporal rupture" which causes individuals to be unable to reconcile "now" with "then," and

"before" with "after" (1991). Langer writes that:

> Straining against what we might call disruptive memory is an effort to reconstruct a semblance of continuity in a life that began as, and now resumes what we would consider, a normal existence. 'Cotemporality' becomes the controlling principle of these testimonies, as witnesses struggle with the impossible task of making their recollections of the camp experience coalesce with the rest of their lives. (1991:22)

While the building of continuity through the life story has been explored in depth in Langer and other's works, little has been written about the potential for the creation of visual images to induce a similar process of coherence building.

Photographer Susan Sontag, however, has written extensively about the function of the photograph and the process of its creation on a societal level. Sontag theorizes about the often compulsive need to photograph, to capture the present as it transitions to past, writing "photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible, of making it stand still" (1977:163). Sontag refers to this as "fixing" the elusive, writing that, "all talismanic uses of photographs express a feeling both sentimental and implicitly magical: they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality" (1977:16).

This conception of the photograph is heavy with meaning regarding not only the present reality but also another reality, whether it may be one of the past or of the imagination. This became apparent in the images that resulted from participatory workshops included in my research process. When research participants were initially given cameras approximately three months into my fieldwork, the tools were immediately embraced with much excitement. While most of the children had been exposed to cameras used by authority figures in local schools and non-governmental organizations, their understanding of the

camera was primarily as a tool used solely by adults for documentation. As a result, the opportunity to use a camera for extended periods of time, and to use it in a process of "play," was an experience that, unlike my previous attempts at formal interviews, elicited enthusiastic participation.

In one of their first interactions with the cameras, the children initiated a discussion regarding their community in Thailand and which landmarks and local sites were most worthy of photographing. They quickly decided amongst themselves that they would take a walk around the local community and take pictures of all of the different places they were familiar with — their friends' homes, local market, and monastery. When they returned and began discussing the photos, however, it became clear that, when viewed alone, the images did in fact portray prominent landmarks in their Thai community. The images' significance to each child, however, was much more closely linked to their homes in Burma than their new Thailand-based environment. Rather than simply a repetition of their present surroundings, the photos did in fact become, as Sontag proposed, an attempt to contact another reality.

A photograph (Fig. 3.1) by 12-year-old Gee shows a friend's house with a young boy on the porch. In a written caption, Gee acknowledges that this home belongs to her friend and that it is "my friend's house," but she simultaneously uses the home in the picture as a concrete symbol of the home and family of her past, saying, "But, it makes me miss my home very much because it seems like my home." This layering of abstract meaning and hidden meaning over physical reality occurs again and again. Ipo comments that an especially "beautiful" house (Fig. 3.2) is "like the house I lived in before," though he recognizes that it is "not like my house." Somchai captures an image (Fig. 3.3) of a mother and her children

and writes, "It reminds me of home, so I like it because I miss my mother and my home."

Another set of photographs (Fig. 3.4, Fig. 3.5) taken on a separate occasion by 15-year-old Khin Soe Oo, displaced from her village in Karen state, depict cultural differences between her home village and host community by photographing beds and their inferred styles of sleeping. In direct contrast to her own bunk bed in her boarding room (Fig. 3.5), she describes a photo of sleeping mats in the home of a local Karen family (Fig. 3.4), writing: "There is something about the house in this photo. In this photo is a mother's bed and a son's bed next to it. The beds look so good to sleep in. This is the Karen style."

Such comments express a sense of paradox between lived reality and memories of a past life that remain relevant. It is a paradox that, while painful in its recognition of what is missing, promotes connection to a time that, more often than not, is marginalized by a new social, political, and cultural order. Jao keenly represents the paradox and its personal implications, commenting that a certain picture (Fig. 3.6) "makes me miss my house, but it still feels good to look at." Khin Soe Oo expresses a similar paradox in her comments regarding a photo of a friend's mother washing clothes (Fig. 3.7). While she expresses that "the love of all mothers is so meaningful" and ties that to the act of washing clothes, she also acknowledges that the woman in the picture is not her mother, nor is the home her home. Represented in both of these comments is a simultaneous regocnition of significance and absence.

While this perspective was not the only prevalent perspective expressed by participants in a post-migration context, it represents a significant attempt to constitute and simultaneously interrogate a sense of connection with both a

present and past notion of home, just as the life story works to, as Langer writes, connect "now" and "then" (1991).

By documenting a physical reality, but also exposing layers of otherwise inaccessible personal significance, workshop participants revealed a great deal about the way in which they engage with an unfamiliar geographic location and negotiate new realities through their past positions as citizens of a foreign country, members of a distinctly different culture and class, and children of a distant family.

Sontag writes, "photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of a space in which they are insecure" (1977:9). The process alluded to by Sontag, of taking possession of the present and framing it in a manner that minimizes insecurity, bears great resemblance to Linde's characterization of the telling of a life story as an attempt to relieve confusion and uneasiness by fitting a new event into an ongoing narrative. Both processes rely heavily on the ability of the individual to create a coherent representation of self that places disparate, often unanticipated realities, within a plausible and acceptable context. Regardless of how this context is achieved— by framing the present within a camera's viewfinder or crafting it into a harmonizing narrative— processes of self-reflection and representation are crucial to establishing the boundaries of an understanding of self and proposing how that understanding may function within a personal history.

*Obstacles and Limitations:*

The following section will revisit the obstacles and limitations of the application of life story methodologies to children introduced early in this piece, outlining the ways in which visual participatory processes address these

concerns. This is not to say that visual participatory processes do not have their own limitations and contexts in which they are inappropriate, rather, only that in the case of research with children, visual participatory processes represent a significant improvement in acknowledging and addressing challenges associated with engaging children in ethnographic research.

As introduced earlier, the application of the life story model to child research subjects is restricted by logistical, analytical, societal, and ethical implications. On a logistical level, the life story model suffers from barriers that limit the participation of child research subjects, whether barriers of shyness, age, experience, or complex reasoning and critical thinking skills. The use of visual participatory activities represents a strategy for clearing these barriers. Not only does it provide a way of circumventing formal interview processes that may be unfamiliar, if not threatening, to young children, the use of the visual arts in research also infuses an attitude of exploration, play and, perhaps most significantly, agency, into what may otherwise be seen as a mundane or distant task. Reflecting on their own research with young girls in South Australia, Bloustien and Baker write:

> Unlike questionnaires or interviews, which may be perceived as dull and time-consuming, leaving little room for personal involvement and experimentation, here the girls felt they could be more active participants. They also seemed to understand immediately that being invited to experiment with the camera they would have far more control over the final product… this was an invitation in both situations to 'play' with the equipment as they chose (2003:71).

In addition to countering the challenge of framing participation in the research process as something both enjoyable and secure for child research

subjects, visual participatory processes also address an additional logistical concern associated with the complexity (or lack thereof) of child narratives when expressed verbally.

The use of photography in the research process became a crucial tool through which child subjects in both Bloustien and Baker's research and in my own work in the Thailand-Burma border region were able to engage critically with complex concerns associated with self-making. As Bloustien and Baker summarized, it is unlikely that their child subjects would have been able to verbally build a vocabulary to explain their awareness of multiple conflicting selves and discursive sites, however, through photography, they were able to illustrate the ways they constituted understandings of self as they "'experimented' with a variety of images and poses" (2003:74). In their research, Bloustien and Baker reference moments of the "unsaid," perhaps "unsayable"- moments when, verbal explanations failed and the visual "expressed far more than the girls were capable of saying" (2003:69).

In my research, the camera was similarly used as an important tool for expressing and representing perspectives that may have been otherwise too complex to communicate verbally. While, in verbal conversations, participants struggled to offer explanations for the gaps in representation created by a lack of access to environments, places, and people that would have otherwise played heavily into their representation of self (namely their homes, families, and surroundings in Burma), through the camera they were able to construct a reality that represented not only what is present, but what is most significant in their past. Through the camera, participants could recognize reality but still express the continued significance of a home that was marginalized not only by a second-

country context, but also by geography and time.

The dilemmas presented by the use of the life story model with children on a societal level— namely that children's narratives are often marginalized or silenced by those of adults— are not altogether absent from visual participatory processes. As digital cameras and photo processing have become increasingly affordable, amateur photographers, many of who are parents photographing their children, can now take unlimited snapshots. In this situation, just as in the case of verbal narration, children "have very little say over how they are pictured" (Holland 1997: 107). The contrast, between the marginalization that occurs in the case of verbal narrative and in the case of photography, lies in the camera as a vehicle for power. As possession of the camera shifts, so too does the power to portray. While this shift in itself is not a clean break, nor is it accurate to assume that because the child holds the camera they have complete freedom of expression, the camera as a temporary possession does represent an opportunity to "speak" with an authoritative "voice," whereas the verbal voice can, at any time, be disrupted or silenced.

Finally, in regard to the ethical considerations associated with the life story as a research strategy, the use of visual participatory processes again offers concrete improvements over other approaches, though issues of adult-child collaboration and cooperation remain exceedingly multifarious and potentially precarious. Visual participatory processes, and similar methods, mitigate potential ethical tensions by extending traditional methods and introducing an approach that is tailored specifically to children. James writes, "ethnographic research with children is beginning to embrace, as part of its method, different kinds of research techniques," (2001:246). She continues, explaining how task-centered

approaches, which include visual and participatory processes, present as an improvement in ethnographic research practices:

> The use of such task-centered activities are a significant development in childhood research. Not only do they draw children in as research participants, thereby furthering the research dialogue, they also encourage childhood research to be reflexive: about the data that is produced by children and about what, as ethnographers, they will reproduce as written and authoritative text about childhood (2001:255).

In the except above, James outlines three especially significant features of task-centered activities, namely, that these types of research approaches draw children in, further the research dialogue, and encourage reflexivity in childhood research.

In regard to the first two advantages referenced by James, Bloustien and Baker refer to their strategy in addressing this negotiation of access and promotion of dialogue as a process of "ethnography by proxy" (2003:72). Due to the age discrepancy between researcher and participants and the status of the researcher as a stranger and outsider, Bloustien and Baker point out that it is "rare for an adult researcher to be physically invited into certain spaces, such as bedrooms or homes of participants' friends and relatives" (2003:71). Implicit in this analysis is the understanding that to ask to be invited into these "inner-worlds" of research subjects would broach ethical lines, whereas, by providing a camera for extended periods of time, fieldwork could be conducted remotely, in whatever setting and at whatever time that young participants' chose. Key here is the agency that is transferred to the participant through this process of ethnography by proxy, which allows participants to decide where, when, and what will be introduced into the wider research and discussion.

The digital camera itself represents a key tool in this process. With the function to record, but also to edit, crop, or delete photographs taken during the research process, participants are given direct control over what is shared and what remains private. These gaps in representation, embodied by a deleted photograph or even an event that was never photographed to begin with, represents the power of participants to determine what events were too ordinary, too meaningful, or even too threatening to share with the researcher (Bloustien and Baker, 2003:73). Thus, a system evolves in which the participants not only have the power to determine how they represent themselves and their surroundings, but also which of these representations may be seen and used by the researcher, and which remain outside of the boundaries of the study.

This point is also closely tied to James' third point regarding the reflexivity of childhood research (2001:255). Processes that incorporate the perspectives, opinions, and concrete choices of participants, not only in data collection but also in editing and presentation, provide researchers with the opportunity to consider the choices that have been made by participants and think critically about how best to respect and extend those choices in the writing of a resulting text. While researchers gathering only verbal responses to pointed questions and perspectives based on observation have little to go on in terms of determining where the subjects themselves draw lines of privacy and agency, researchers using participatory processes have additional information, opinions, and perspectives they can harness in order to avoid the pitfalls of inaccurate or unethical representation.

James writes that processes like those described here are key in the future of ethnographic research and childhood studies, in that they "are designed both

to engage children's interests and to exploit their particular talents and abilities" (2001: 253). This, perhaps, is the comprehensive and all-encompassing strength of the visual participatory process: its ability to access the worlds of child subjects by soliciting their interest; its ability to engage with participants while still offering a significant amount of agency in representation; and, lastly, its ability to recognize the specific means by which children conceive of the world and harness such activities within the research development, creation, and production processes.

## Conclusion:

The particular method of visual auto-ethnography employed by this case study and explored in this paper proved to be invaluable in gaining access to the process by which displaced children attempt to negotiate a sense of self in post-migration contexts. Through visual play participants were provided an opportunity to express, explore, and represent their surroundings. Through this process, participants were able to offer explanations for the gaps in representation created by a lack of access to scenarios that would have otherwise played heavily into their representation of self (namely their homes, families, and surroundings in Burma). While participants captured their physical surroundings, they also depicted a struggle to represent themselves within a social, political, and geographic reality often distant from their own sense of self. The significance of the camera as a tool for representation, then, is not necessarily its ability to document reality, but instead its ability to construct a reality that represents not only what is present, but what is most significant in each individual's past.

In this way, the utility of visual processes mirrors the theoretical underpinnings of the life story method. Both methodologies are concrete tools which seek to make otherwise inaccessible self-making processes either visible, via visual methods, or audible, via the life story method. The process of creating and communicating these representations holds significance not only in research, but in its ability to allow individuals to situate their pasts within the present, to negotiate chasms between expectation and experience, and to disrupt reality in such a way as to allow for the reconciliation of otherwise disparate selves.

Visual participatory processes, however, represent a marked improvement over the traditional life story method when employed in research with children. The promise of participatory approaches lies not only in their ability to rectify logistical, analytical, societal, and ethical challenges left unanswered by the life story method, but also to propose and pursue collaborative engagement in the research process otherwise incompatible to research with children. Participatory visual methods extend the access of the researcher, venturing to places physically and conceptually unreachable due to barriers of age, distance, and familiarity. Furthermore, participatory methods extend this access as a part of an experience more tailored to the interests, abilities, and communicative methods of children, presenting opportunities for "play" while still broaching theoretically relevant content and concepts. Most significantly, however, visual participatory processes allow participants to engage in self-making through a layered process that allows them to explore and negotiate a sense of self through multiple strategies and systems of representation. Through the crayon or camera, participants can create multiple realities, construct or communicate memory, and test out mechanisms for effectively connecting experiences, understanding, and selves that may otherwise remain isolated.

For displaced children, many aspects of their existence and position in a second country or community are non-negotiable. An inability to actively pursue solutions to the challenges of their realities, whether they be in relation to homesickness, longing for family, or a feeling of isolation in an unfamiliar context, leaves few strategies for coping with migration or "re-settling" into present situations and surroundings. Through visual methods, however, participants are able to recognize the constraints of reality and subvert them, expressing

the continued significance of a home, community, and family marginalized in a post-migration context. While reality, and its constraints, remains permanent, through visual practices participants were able to, if only temporarily, access and successfully incorporate a seemingly foreign past into a lived present, creating a representation of self not defined by displacement, but one that situated displacement within a larger landscape of experience.

# Appendix:

## Notes on Methods

### Interviews with Targeted Adults

The first portion of the research involves a series of interviews with targeted adults in both Sangkhlaburi District, Thailand and Ye Township of Mon State, Burma. Interviews were conducted with two separate groups of adults: 1) Community members of special interest; and 2) Non-governmental organization (NGO) or Community-Based Organization (CBO) staff. All interviews were conducted in the language preferred by the interviewee: English, Thai, Burmese, Karen, or Mon. Translators were used for those interviews conducted in Thai, Karen, Mon, or Burmese. Permission to record the audio of each interview was requested and, in the cases where permission was granted, audio recordings were kept. On average, all interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Ten adult community members from Sangkhlaburi District, Thailand and ten from Ye Township, Burma were interviewed as part of this interview portion of the study. Of those community members who have had a significant experience of migration, either across a national border into Thailand, or to a ceasefire zone within Burma, two specific groups of individuals were of special interest: 1) adults who experienced this significant migration as a child, or, 2) parents whose migration experience included their children (of any age). Through

these criteria, I hoped to gain both examples of how migration is understood as part of a life story in adult subjects and how parents and other authority figures may express the experience of the child- an interest that was closely tied to documenting how adults may express the stories of children when children are relegated to "overhearers" of their own stories. Along with local community members, staff of locally based NGOs or CBOs were also interviewed. These staff members included local school teachers, school directors, boarding home staff, and locally based volunteers who were interviewed with a goal of gaining additional contextual details regarding the political and cultural environment that must be navigated by children displaced in the region. A total of five interviews were conducted with national and community organization staff members.

## Participatory Arts Processes

The second and final portion of my research attempted to engage children in the two separate communities mentioned above through participatory arts curriculum. This participatory approach has three main goals: 1) to enable students to record and reflect upon their own community and experiences; 2) to promote critical dialogue within groups of students through large and small group reflection upon work resulting from various large-group discussions; 3) to enable the access of children's perspectives through a variety of participatory processes, including drawing, photography, storytelling, and narration.

To achieve these goals, I partnered with local schools to arrange weekly sessions during which I worked with the participating students, asking them to engage in discussion related to their sense of self, their migration experience, and

their current (post-migration) experience growing up in either Thailand or in Mon State, Burma. Each discussion was open-ended and was initially borne out of a question posed either by me or by a staff member of the school in question. After holding the discussion, which children were encouraged to take an active role in leading and developing, participants could choose to respond to the discussion in any variety of ways; first through drawing, then, after the halfway point of the weekly workshops, through photography. Storytelling and narration (either written or verbal) was also always an option, though, for the most part, students preferred to physically create their responses through the artistic mediums offered.

All students taking part in the participatory workshops were asked to complete the activities described above in the hopes of encouraging them to produce, contextualize, and synthesize images. Through the production of both hand-drawn and photographic images, students not only learned the basics of the artistic mediums they chose to explore, but they also became accustomed to reflecting upon and sharing their own experiences, perspectives, and thoughts. This section of the research epitomizes the participatory approach - allowing the individual (in this case, the student), rather than the researcher, journalist, or policymaker, to choose what best describes and represents their own experience.

After images were produced, the participatory workshop asked each participant to contextualize the images that they had created. While this primarily occurred through each individual's presentation of their own photographs, as well as large-group discussion about the results of each assignment, participants were also given the opportunity to caption and describe their work in a more formal manner. Captions were then translated by school staff and a local translator.

Finally, the resulting images and narratives were synthesized as students worked together through discussion to identify themes and issues that emerged from the works they created. While participating students were a key part of the identification of synthesized ideas, they also

proposed connections and potential modes of presentation, often highlighting parallels, similarities, and differences between the products created within the workshops.

Each of these phases were integrated within the workshop plan, with the goal of not only equipping the students with the ability to produce, contextualize, and synthesize images related to their own experiences, but also with the goal of better accessing and representing the perspective of participants in the study both throughout the process and in the final outcome of the research.

## Confidentiality and Consent

All informants, whether interviewees or participatory activity participants, were made aware that any information they shared would be used as a part of this research, and that any image or recording gathered by them would be used in academic presentations. In addition, informants were told that participation was entirely voluntary, that any question, project, or discussion could be declined, and that participation could be fully withdrawn at any time. Participants were asked to sign release forms and, in the case of those under the age of 18, were also requested to provide signed permission from their guardian (for the majority of whom was a boarding home staff member or administrator who was present during all phases of the research). Informants' names have been withheld for confidentiality reasons, and false names have been given to each individual participating. Migration details, village names, or other specific information that could be used to identify a student was removed from all images, and deleted from any written narrative or caption.

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