

VOICES FROM NEPAL

UNCOVERING HUMAN TRAFFICKING THROUGH COMICS JOURNALISM

PAGE NOTES FOR INSTRUCTORS

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PAGE NOTES FOR INSTRUCTORS

Page 4: I was trying to capture how chaotic a live interview can be when it spans multiple languages and listeners. Thankfully these “junket” interviews were a rarity, when groups of people would think nothing of sitting in on an interview out of curiosity, despite my protestations for interviewee privacy. This group in particular felt especially united because they came from the same village and had tragically been tricked into suffering the same fate. But, early on in the trip, it became clear that, for the news cycle, people such as Mohan had become synonymous with organ trafficking and thus designated as a “must-interview” bullet point for journalists on their journeys through “kidney valley,” as this region has now become known.¹ I had first heard about them while staying in Kavre at the school for the blind. The interior monologue of questions you see in the caption boxes were all racing through my head as I interviewed the men: Will this benefit me more than them? How can retelling their story yet again help them? I left out a pre-interview conversation I had with my fixer about paying them, which only added to the sense of unease as it was clear that previous journalists had been happy to go along with a more transactional way of getting to their story. I had a similar sense of unease about the dance that journalists and their subjects sometimes do at the brick kilns in Bhaktapur (p. 74).

Page 6: You can see the actual scanned original of my field sketch of Mohan here, complete with my handwritten transcriptions. My orange floral necklace is from having paid tribute at a local temple prior to the interview.

Page 10: This photo appeared in the US State Department’s 2013 *Trafficking in Persons* report (p. 32) as a new methodology for combating human trafficking: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/210737.pdf>.

Page 11: *Borderland* was my first concerted effort of adapting survivor testimonies into a comics format, in partnership with then–Fulbright fellow Olga Trusova. The biggest challenge was not being in the field, since Olga, as the Ukrainian national, was the one who spent time on the ground conducting the interviews. We would then parse the transcripts for the most compelling and appropriate stories, and I adapted those into the comics format. You can read a preview of it here: <https://issuu.com/borderland/docs/preview>. I chose a single-tone color scheme to reflect the somber tone and keep the print costs down. It was also my first foray into crowdfunding via our Kickstarter page (URL footnoted on the page itself), critically supplementing the Fulbright budget, which didn’t stretch very far between two people, Olga’s trips from California to Ukraine, and our print costs.

You can see the behind-the-scenes production process for the project on the Prezi platform (which is still going strong, a decade later): <https://prezi.com/view/tPEBAWxtDCbqzZ0HxPOT/>.

The project was a great success and eventually was translated into Ukrainian and Russian and distributed around Eastern Europe by the International Organization for Migration. It was the

¹ Zeba Warsi, “In Nepal’s ‘Kidney Valley,’ Poverty Drives an Illegal Market for Human Organs,” PBS, January 17, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/in-nepals-kidney-valley-poverty-drives-an-illegal-market-for-human-organs>.

second time I had seen my work translated, printed, and distributed on the ground internationally (the first being my graphic history of the 2009 Honduran coup), though the first in which the panels were blown up and exhibited in public spaces (also shown on p. 12): <https://ukraine.iom.int/news/iom-ukraine-joins-human-rights-days-euro-village>. From the marks on the Lascaux cave walls to the DIY punk ethos of the indie zine scene (starting with the OG zinester, Thomas Paine), the malleability and accessibility of visual storytelling as a tool to inspire, provoke, and agitate is one of the main reasons I love comics.

Page 12: As is so often the case with enormous projects that span multiple years, you never quite know how they will evolve when you first start. When I was originally introduced to Cecilia she had already single-handedly completed a number of impressively broad studies in the field in Nepal and was one of the few people I'd met who was juggling the same number of projects that I was (if not more). I remain extremely grateful to my very close friend Matt Bahls for the original introduction, as well as to Cecilia for continuing to be such a generous and talented collaborator.

Page 13: Speaking of collaborators, our third co-PI on the project, Margaret Boittin, was absent from this meeting but very much there in spirit throughout the countless weeks, months, and years of work (spanning literally *thousands* of emails) the project has involved. She first appears on p. 122.

Page 16: The more discerning of you may notice a slight shift in the storytelling during this first chapter. These were the first pages I drew, and I wrote and produced them chronologically, in the (overly optimistic) hope at the time that I would publish three tiers a week for the duration of the project. I also launched a Kickstarter (in the wake of the success of *Borderland's* – see note on p. 11), which crept over the mandatory funding deadline just in time: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/archcomix/graphic-journalism-on-human-trafficking-in-nepal>. You can actually see my younger self inking the last tier here at 00:16 of the Kickstarter promo video.

The two panels on the bottom tier were based on actual conversations with editors (who will remain nameless) to whom I pitched the project.

Page 17: I struggled with finding the right balance of personal information to include in the story early on, since I was far more interested in highlighting the challenges of covering a news story through graphic journalism in real time (as shown by my subtle campaigning for the medium in the top tier). However, as the project evolved, I came to realize that I had become the inadvertent narrative conduit to hang the otherwise pretty disparate stories on. I've always shied away from autobio or memoir comics for the simple reason that I think the last thing the world needs are the quotidian meditations of a white, middle-class, anglophone, cis male – and yet, I appreciate that my background and demographic are inseparable from the sort of person and journalist I am.

Page 18: I also didn't want to hijack the narrative toward any soul-searching or inner emotional journey à la *Eat Pray Love*, which was frankly one of my greatest concerns. My first marriage was on the rocks at the time, which accentuated the sense of isolation I felt, as highlighted in the third and fourth panels here, but I deliberately chose to make it more of a visual diary entry than a point of exploration, for fear of overbalancing the main goal of the book.

Speaking of which, deciding what sort of story I was going to tell was one of the greatest structural challenges for the book, since I was torn between three very different approaches: the first, producing

commercially viable pieces that I could sell to news outlets like the BBC (obviously minus my personal journey); the second, producing a long-form graphic novel that I could eventually pitch to a publisher; and the third, collecting and curating the survivor stories for the research project (which actually only came to fruition once I was already in Nepal). This last option is a common entry point I use when researching a story: I approach a nongovernmental organization (NGO) with past experience in the topic that might be amenable to sharing resources, and they grant access to their staff or clients. In return I produce comics that can be used in their outreach materials.

Panel 5: This is actually a scan of the thumbnail of the comic on p. 49 from *SOLD* by Patricia McCormick that I used as a calling card for what a graphic novel adaptation of the book might look like.

Last panel: Gemma was one such contact who helped to provide more up-to-date details on the trafficking landscape than what I could find online. Speaking of which, I was acutely aware that a montage of comics panels showing me hunched over a laptop furiously emailing anti-trafficking organizations in Nepal and the UK wouldn't make for the most compelling of comics, so I kept that to a minimum too.

Page 19, middle tier: You'll recognize the pre-scanned/Photoshopped/lettered artwork from p. 17 – further proof of how I was juggling the show/don't show behind-the-scenes aspect of putting the daily comics together while traveling.

Page 22: The admittedly staccato pace between the tiers here (see my above note on p. 16) might seem a little disjointed: bear in mind these tiers were published individually online, so not only did they need to function autonomously, but they also needed a self-contained rhythm to them, not dissimilar to the old editorial gag strips of yore: setup, joke, punchline. This is the first appearance of Pushpa Basnet, whom we meet properly on p. 32, by which time I've abandoned my daily tier goal. This was in part due to my dissatisfaction with having to crowbar events into the tripartite panel structure, as the tone felt repetitive and the limitations of a single tier per event/day restrictive.

Pages 23–4: In a way, the full-page sketches were meant as an antidote to the sense of visual claustrophobia that I felt the narrative was suffering from with the tiers. They were also more of a nod to travelogue/reportage books that I was inspired by like Craig Thompson's *Carnet de Voyage* and Emanuel Guibert's *The Photographer*. I find myself returning to the latter especially to indulge my desire to comb through photographic tear-sheets, which is something I experimented with by including some of the unused sketches of subjects on pp. 124 and 128. Speaking of inspirations, as an avid reader of "indie comics" growing up, I was also always mesmerized by comics handling alternative histories, such as the exploration of the Jack the Ripper murders in *From Hell* or the countercultural head-trip that was underground comix such as R. Crumb's *Zap* or *Hup* and Gilbert Shelton's *Fabulous Furry Freak Bros*. Although they might be rooted in fiction (most of it dystopian sci-fi), creators such as Frank Quitely (with *We3*), Grant Morrison (*The Filth*), Warren Ellis (*Transmetropolitan*) and, of course, Alan Moore (*Watchmen*) exploded the page and played with the idea of time between pages, panels, or fourth walls. Ralph Steadman was another huge inspiration, going toe-to-toe with Hunter S. Thompson to portray a truth that dragged us kicking and screaming into their nightmarish, acid-tripping reality, even if that was a few trashed hotel rooms away from the more buttoned-down one readers were accustomed to. Like the self-referential narratives of Miguel de Unamuno (*Niebla*), Alisdair Gray (*Lanark*), or Jorgue Luis Borges

(*Fictions*), I loved how the authors and their characters deliberately tried to discredit or dismantle the artifice of storytelling as the reader sprinted along the textual stepping stones, trying to keep pace. Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp* or Dash Shaw's *Bodyworld*, to my mind, are rewriting our visual grammar in a similar way. Moving beyond the page to the screen, Patrick Sean Farley blew my teenage mind with his e-sheep comix in the late 1990s,² Daniel Merlin Goodbrey's Hypercomics³ fired my Flash-based imagination, and Stu Campbell (aka Sutu) seemingly combined both with his epic *Nawlz* webcomic⁴ – together they (and the Flash wizards over at Submarine Channel) were my inspirational bridge into interactive work.

Pages 26–7: These two pages were part of the first piece of work from the project to be published (by the BBC) while I was in Nepal, and the format marked my transition from one tier per day to using multiple tiers per story. However, it was limited by the BBC news website's formatting, which had been designed for photo slideshows. As a result, the piece was displayed in tiers, meaning that each tier had to work as a stand-alone. This clearly suited the approach that I'd developed while chronicling the trip but meant that I had to forego the luxury of varying the panel height or using splash panels. The piece actually starts with Laxmi's story (on p. 50) and ran with the overly tabloid-like title "I Was 14 When I Was Sold," using Laxmi's own words.

The piece itself was a viral success, garnering over 1.2 million views in forty-eight hours and prompting the BBC to run an impromptu video interview with me, hunched over my laptop: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22247747>.

I have to thank my editor Giles Wilson for shepherding the comic through the various different departments and championing graphic journalism at such a prestigious outlet. As Giles says at 00:50 in the video: "this [trafficking in Nepal] is one of those issues that otherwise would struggle to get that level of attention." Tellingly, the behind-the-scenes article about the comic is still live, while the link to the original comic has since been deactivated, largely because of its interactive slideshow format, I assume. The piece was also a testament to the international appeal of comics journalism since I laid out the lettering for the different World Service versions in several different languages: Nepali (first and foremost), Arabic, Persian, Ukrainian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Urdu – some of which needed the order reversed to preserve the right-left reading direction.

Page 28: Continuing the nod to the BBC, the sketch of my local street here and accompanying caption is a nod to the impressionistic power that graphic journalism has, as I tried to situate it somewhere in the wider artistic context of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.

Page 30, bottom tier: This continues the thread I mentioned earlier on p. 18. Ironically the mention of "cloning myself" was all too prescient, since I abandoned working on daily tiers from chapter 2 onwards.

2 <https://www.electricsheepcomix.com/spiders/> was one that blew my mind on a 56k modem back in the day.

3 <http://e-merl.com/hypercomics>.

4 <https://www.sutueatsflies.com/art/nawlz>.

Page 34: I remain convinced of the power of art to release and heal deep-seated trauma and considered training as an art therapist on the side, so that I could actually engage with the trauma that surfaces during the reporting process, as opposed to only exposing it. But of course, time is the key ingredient here, not least the language barrier.

Page 35: I really like the idea of a creative dialogue between Laxmi and my respective visual styles as we both visualize parts of the same story. That was also the goal in the symmetry between the last panels on p. 37 in the middle and bottom tiers.

Page 38, panel 2: Much like the interview with the former trafficker later in the book (p. 148), I wanted to show the impact and repercussions that trafficking enforcement can have on the defendant's family, not only the plaintiff's. As you can see in the first panel of the third tier, stigma (albeit reversed, in this case) plays a part too, with Manju's father abandoning the family after his wife's arrest as a trafficker.

Page 49: The panel layout on this page was deliberately trying to evoke the chaos and uncertainty of a border crossing (months before I actually made the crossing on foot myself, on p. 116). It was a subtle homage to Joe Sacco's page on Cairo in *Palestine*.

Page 50: As discussed above, this comic was produced for the BBC's tier-by-tier slideshow, which is why there are so many sub-divided panels on this tier. I also wanted to play with the idea of making the violent act of kidnapping seem jarring and including the fade out to represent Laxmi falling unconscious after being drugged. But I also wanted to keep the pace of the story quick and mirror the following tier, when Laxmi is drugged a second time (p. 51, top tier). You might notice the difference in panel sizes and experimentation (such as the full bleed panel at the bottom of p. 52) when I was able to break free of the constraints of the BBC piece (which was limited to a dozen tiers and needed to provide greater scope and context without delving so deeply into Laxmi's full story).

Page 53: This is one of the greatest challenges of working with intermediaries (be they fixers or translators) in other languages (as already demonstrated on p. 6), since depending on their personalities they are far more interested in getting to the end of a story rather than dissecting the internal logic of the story itself. It is also very challenging to switch to a more granular focus when your window with a particular source is so tight: Laxmi had been invited to speak at the meeting and then agreed to speak with me one-on-one afterwards to answer follow-up questions, but there are only so many times you can rephrase a question without receiving a satisfactory response before you concede that some details will have to remain ambiguous. As you will see on p. 56 in the interview with the police chief, Gita, the role of family members in Nepal can be fluid: it is common practice to refer to total strangers who are older than you as "Auntie/Uncle." A clear example of this is on the third panel of p. 95.

Page 57: The management of these communal sessions is often difficult, given the language barrier, and the inherent confidence that a translator must have in order to interrupt particularly gregarious speakers, so that non-native speakers can understand. Very often we would hear testimonies lasting three or four continuous minutes that would be distilled into only a few translated sentences. Fortunately, my basic Nepali soon allowed me to recognize key words and markers that I could seize on and ask follow-up questions about, which helped to disentangle some of the details.

Page 65: The author in question is Greg Mortenson, whose founding and management of what later became the Central Asian Institute (CAI, chronicled in his bestselling memoir, *Three Cups of Tea*) came under fire from investigative journalist (and former CAI donor) Jon Krakauer in his book *Three Cups of Deceit*. Regardless of whose side you take, my point is that in development circles too often the media spotlight tends to follow the extraordinary origin story of the (often Western) outsider, as opposed to the local community leaders doing the more important and less glamorous work, year after year.

Pages 70–3: These ran as a self-contained story on Poynter’s website and was perhaps the closest to what I originally had in mind for the project of directly translating illustrated reportage from my sketchbook to the webpage with minimal intervention.

Page 70: Bhaktapur is home to 64 of the 110 kilns in the Kathmandu valley, just under an hour by road from the capital. The majority of the workers are seasonal, spending half their year working in the fields and the other living on-site in the dusty red shadows of the chimneys. Many of those I spoke to were there to pay off loans to *naikes* (Nepali for “middlemen”), whose exorbitant rates of interest keep their borrowers stuck in a cycle of bonded labor.

Although admittedly sketchy, the following portraits convey a sense of personality and character when combined with the snippets of sentences uttered by the children and siblings of the workers above: unposed, hurried, and straight to ink as they wandered around me, inquisitive as any child would be. As you can see at the bottom of the page, I experimented with doing full-color on Pankaj, only to find it was too time-consuming.

Page 71: You’ll notice as well in the second worker’s speech balloon that Youraj was directly doubting his comments about sending his children to school – perhaps in relation to a recent raid that has raised reporters’ suspicions.

Quick sketching also gives me the ability to include mini-explainers, back of the napkin–style, such as the five-part process of making bricks at the bottom of the page. Another advantage of sketching in this instance was the fact that few people were willing to take a break from making bricks – understandable, given that they are paid by the thousand – forcing me to create a composite image of them while they were working, as opposed to a more static, posed portrait. This echoes the vitality in the line and use of light and shade typically seen in other, non-posed visual journalism such as courtroom sketches.

Page 72: The stories were much the same at the second site: parents telling us that their children were in school but offering little proof – all the less convincing because they were working on-site while I was conducting interviews. Two more examples of the benefits of live sketching versus after the fact: I was forced to improvise a doppelganger for Hari (in the lower-right corner) as he was too busy making bricks to stay still while answering my questions. Likewise, Dinmaya (above Hari) didn’t stop to look up at me once, so a posed head-on portrait shot wouldn’t have fully captured my (admittedly brief) impression of her.

Page 73: The balance of words and image is another key factor in presenting this sort of work, which in this case forced me to come up with a quick solution to separate the two voices of the workers in the top half of the page on the fly. Interestingly, the overlapping speech balloons are a

neat metaphor for my experience of the joint interview: full of interruptions, overlapping comments, and a general struggle to hear one voice over the other. Not to mention the doubt emerging as to who was telling the truth – represented by the speech balloon in the middle pointing to a blank space, which was actually a shortcut I used to refer to a comment made by my translator.

Last was my conversation with the manager of the kiln, another situation where the appearance of a camera would have only made him reluctant to talk or exacerbated his suspicions of an outsider’s motives for being there in the first place.

Page 74: When I returned to the brick kilns on my next visit, it was a very different experience: the longer time spent on-site meant I could make more preliminary drawings and take photo references, having earned the workers’ trust, which I then used to work up into the finished, full-color pages here. I wanted to juxtapose the two approaches to covering the same topic to highlight the difference in reporting styles. I have to confess, I personally prefer the immediacy and roughness of the former (pp. 70–3) to the more polished, full-color version in the latter (pp. 74–6).

Page 80: The middle tier was directly adapted from a conversation I had with Dr. Joshi and once again highlights the simple yet effective power of rendering the unseen visible. Too often I found that Nepali children were used to being resilient when it came to enduring pain and harsh living conditions, so much so that adults discounted their complaints. Visualizing the horrific effects of living in such a toxic environment, as well as the everyday pain and suffering they described so nonchalantly (bottom tier, panel 1 on p. 78, or middle tier, p. 79), was my way of highlighting these untold traumas.

Page 82: I felt a real push and pull about including photography among the drawn panels throughout the book, not so subtly influenced by *The Photographer*, which I’ve already mentioned. I chose to include it here because it breaks up the composition of the page and roots the narrative in a very concrete reality (much like the first panel on p. 83). I also enjoy the aesthetic contrast between my simplified sketches and the overwhelming detail of a photograph. Had I drawn the street scene on p. 83, I would undoubtedly have needed more space than a single panel to convey the sensory overload that is so typical from even a cursory glance along a Nepali street – business signs, electricity cables, stalls, balconies, motorcycles, trees.

Page 83: The challenge with interviewing someone as knowledgeable and articulate as Som was deciding how much of his deep-dive introduction to the NGO to include while also trying to maintain visual interest in a very caption-heavy page. I deliberately chose to use a more illustrative style here as I knew that I would be drawing Som and the girls in situ on p. 84 as we walked around the FNC office.

Pages 88–9: Part of experimenting with the longer form of a graphic novel meant I could take my time with certain sections and give myself the luxury of including some extended sequences (which would be impossible to include in a short-form commissioned piece). Although I could have ostensibly crammed these two pages into a single page and condensed the text down, I wanted to show the step-by-step progression from panel to panel, using what Scott McCloud refers to as “movement to movement” transitions between panels in his seminal *Understanding Comics*. I hoped that this would convey the repetitive, monotonous nature of the potter’s work, as well as the work that goes into each and every pot, and the futility of seeing so many broken and discarded in the piles shown in the top tier on p. 89.

Pages 90 and 94: I wanted to show the initial sketchbook portrait and the more finished renderings of the same interviewees here, as a sort of evolution of the illustrated reportage versus polished comic approach I mentioned in my note about p. 74 above.

Page 95: This is a prime example of the flexibility of the term “Uncle” in Nepal, and the undeserved trust that elders often have over the younger generation as a result. The marked absence of “stranger danger” is a key factor in many young people misplacing their trust and accepting bogus job or educational offers from strangers based solely on their word.

Bottom tier: The subtle inclusion of the abusive landlord’s hand over the panel border was meant to be an allegory for his invasion of Sita’s personal space, and a direct reversal of the perspective of the previous panel (the two girls’ heads are barely visible through the gap in the window on the right-hand side).

Page 100: These sketches were included as “ice breakers” while Som and his family visited families around Bardia.

Page 105: This story was made especially difficult by the fact that Som felt formally including an English translator would have disrupted the flow of his conversation with the Badi women, so I listened as best I could and relied on the whispered translations from Sajani, as well as having my audio recording translated after the fact. I did, of course, sketch as much as I could (p. 108 sketches were all live sketched).

It was also one of the last set of pages that I drew for the book, reflected in the more creative choices I made in the layout and composition. The splash page on p. 106, the cutaway on p. 107, and the open layout on p. 109 were concerted efforts to move away from the more formalized 3 x 3 panel structure that I tended to revert back to in the book, based on it providing a more commercial/marketable layout to sell to media outlets.

Page 110: I was candid about the exchange here as I wanted to show the reality of reporting across languages and how access is dependent to an extent on the patience and generosity of your host/fixer/guide/translator. Som has a preternaturally calm and generous spirit, so the brief change in his disposition came as a surprise. The reality of working on the front lines of this issue is that it’s not always clear-cut, trafficker and their “victim,” with the former ensnaring the latter. In some cases, crushing systemic discrimination, lack of options or access to education, and the total absence of anyone protecting their best interests leads people to subject themselves to these exploitative practices⁵ knowingly, assuming it will only be for the short term. Once they’ve taken that path, they inevitably find it nigh on impossible to free themselves from it. The same is true of the young girls I interview on pp. 132–6 in Thamel, Kathmandu, working in fake massage parlors/cabin restaurants.

Pages 120–1: I wanted to play with the hybrid form of giving the lettered treatment to sketches directly scanned from my sketchbook, rather than re-drawing the portraits as more polished pictures, in order to provide further insight into the preliminary notes and ephemera that I build up during a live-sketch/note-taking interview session.

5 Or at least the significant risk that a job offer that is “too-good-to-be-true” might be fraudulent.

Page 122: Denizens of Jhamsikhel will no doubt recognize the names of the local eateries/cafés mentioned here. This page is as close as I get to the more journal-based travel comics of Guy Delisle (*Pyongyang, Shenzhen, Burma Chronicles, Jerusalem*).

Page 124: You can see my direct scan of a sketchbook page here, complete with the abortive gesture of her covering her mouth with her scarf and an unfinished eye that obviously didn't work out! The notes in the center of the page also show that I often try to build up descriptions of third-party characters who feature in the interviews, especially – as in this case – the traffickers.

Pages 126–7, panel 1: You can see how I try to translate the live-sketched gesture from Kamal's interview into the first panel of the story, to convey how he nervously covered his mouth when he spoke.

Page 129, panel 1: Foreshortening for visual emphasis – in this case, the cast-iron tongs that were used as a weapon – was one of the many techniques that I had to abandon when producing the comics for the research study. Interestingly, the exact same dramatic perspective and deliberately cropped layout that appealed to me as an avid reader of vintage comics like EC Comics were found to be confusing and distracting by local audiences.

Pages 132–5: Parts of these pages were published by *Vice* magazine⁶ in November 2014, combining my pages on child labor in sari factories (pp. 158–61) with this coverage of sex trafficking in Thamel's massage parlors.

Page 135: There is no doubt in my mind that using a camera inside this fake massage parlor/brothel would have sent these girls running, as well as antagonizing their drunk client to violence.

Pages 136–7: Sometimes the situation is so sensitive and volatile that even sketching can be perceived as a threat, as was the case here. It was suspicious enough that a *bideshi* (foreigner) was visiting, given that the majority of customers in cabin restaurants are Nepali long-haul truck drivers who are passing through (in contrast to the dance bars of Thamel, who cater to a more international crowd). The pencil sketch on p. 137 was hurriedly dashed off while I strained to remember as many details as possible, drawing from memory.

Pages 138–42: As I acknowledge on p. 138, I created a composite character here based on multiple interview transcripts, which was a similar process we used during the research project. This comic was published in the now-defunct (RIP, though it still lives on as a Tumblr page) interactive iPad magazine *Symbolia*⁷ with assorted interactive extras, such as embedded videos, sketches, and WIP thumbnails.

Page 144: Image Ark⁸ is the name of the gallery, and I'm delighted to say it is still going, a decade later, largely due to its amazing team, led by Marie Ange Sylvain-Holmgren and Ingrid Chiron,

6 Dan Archer, "An Inside Look at Human Trafficking in Nepal," *Vice*, November 4, 2014, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xd5jgq/sari-state-of-affairs-0000475-v21n10>.

7 <https://symboliamag.tumblr.com/>.

8 <https://image-ark.com/>.

not to mention fantastic local staff like Swojan Newa. The less-than-pleased gallery neighbor was representative of a number of dissenting voices (fortunately, in the minority) who argued that such malevolent acts gave Nepal a bad name and should be swept under the carpet for fear of offending public sensibilities. This was especially the case with the comics involving child sexual abuse.

Pages 149–54: These were part of the information campaign I mentioned in the first panel of the last tier on p. 144, and were collected, along with a few other comics that I chose not to include, into a print edition that was translated into Nepali and distributed locally by ECPAT (End Child Prostitution and Trafficking, a global NGO focused on combating the sexual exploitation of children) around Kathmandu to raise awareness. You'll notice the coloring briefly switches from watercolor to digital (Photoshop) to reflect a slightly different style for the printed version, as requested by ECPAT, since it was thought that the bolder, brighter color scheme would hold greater appeal for a younger audience. A few stories that dealt more explicitly with childhood sexual abuse were included in that volume that I decided not to include here since they weren't related to trafficking. My aim with highlighting the trafficker's story was to show the other side of the argument, continuing on from my comment on p. 110: traffickers are not always the mafia-style, high-level criminals that are presented in the media, but often have their own stories of abuse and adversity. Not that I'm excusing their decisions or denying their full responsibility for their actions, to be clear. I just wanted to show a perspective within the topic that is seldom explored. Of the few papers written on the topic, I recommend Emily Troshynski and Jennifer K. Blank, "Sex Trafficking: An Exploratory Study Interviewing Traffickers," *Trends in Organized Crime* 11, no. 1 (2007): 30–41.

Page 149: The cover image was based on the iconic roofs of Durbar Square in the heart of Kathmandu, which had (at the time of writing the comic) become a gathering point for homeless children in the city. The boy on the right is huffing glue from a plastic bag as a way of staying numb/warm during Nepal's brutal winter.

Page 151: I wanted to highlight the pack mentality of the street children here and trace their journey as new arrivals to the city. Clearly not all pathways to homelessness are the same, but it did remind me of similarities with Manju's story from ECDC (p. 39), where unaccompanied children (either orphaned or with parents who work full-time) left to their own devices are highly suggestible and prefer either earning money or playing truant to attending school.

Page 152: This harrowing story was based on a composite character from court transcripts of a Dutch pedophile convicted of abusing homeless children in Kathmandu. Reading through the lever arch folders of testimonies was one of the hardest things I had to do while reporting for this comic, since some of the victims were so young (many were younger than ten). I wanted to insist on telling the story from a survivor's perspective, since we so rarely hear from them in the aftermath of these types of cases. Understandably, many remain traumatized by what happened to them and want to sever all associations with the case. Yet this often means that coverage of the cases centers around the pedophiles and their actions. I wanted to bring survivors' words to the fore and also highlight the lingering sense of confusion and betrayal that these testimonials revealed (last panel on p. 154), not to mention the devastating impact on their future abilities to cultivate positive, trusting, and affectionate relationships.

The predatory trend is for foreign pedophiles to exploit rehabilitation centers for young children (often in rural areas), then spend a short time gaining their trust before luring them away with money, food, or clothing to hotels in Kathmandu (often Thamel), where they force them into having sex. Many of the pedophiles involved have prior convictions in other countries (the records mentioned Central America and Southeast Asia), having used the same technique there, exploiting the economic advantage and cachet as a Caucasian tourist. Those involved can also be hiding in plain sight, even including a former UN official who used his advocacy for child rights as cover for his crimes.⁹ Just when you think it could not get any worse, many foreign pedophiles actually go so far as to set up their own NGOs and outreach programs for better access to potential victims, given the lax regulatory and safety guidelines in the sector.¹⁰ Furthermore, the lack of resources available to Nepal's law enforcement (such as the only recent introduction of biometric data records), weak sentencing (offenders rarely serve more than a decade behind bars and pay fines of only a few thousand dollars), and poor international jurisdictional alignment (many countries only implement the financial restitution of domestic, as opposed to international, victims) mean that even once caught, pedophiles target a different country with the same strategy.

Thankfully, these cases are definite rarities and many NGOs are doing incredible work to combat this heinous abuse. Specifically, Voice of Children¹¹ and the Association for the Protection of Children (APC Nepal) were amazing resources in helping me research the ECPAT comics.

Pages 156–7: This ran on the website of the weekly German news magazine *Der Spiegel*,¹² aimed squarely at wannabe gap-year volunteers to show how their best intentions can often have precisely the opposite effect. The challenge was to present so much information in a way that wasn't pure exposition. The visual devices I included (such as the subtle black and white colonizer in panel 3 of p. 156, using the panel border as the doorway in the bottom panel on p. 156, or the symbolic paper house trapping children in the penultimate panel on p. 157) were to offset the reliance on captions throughout. The records that I had access to for the Mukti Nepal case lacked first-person testimony, which meant it definitely took on more of an illustrative quality than I would have liked.

Page 158: By contrast, pp. 158–61 were the first half of the Vice piece that I mentioned in the note to p. 133, where I made a more concerted effort to insert myself as a reporter. The first tier of p. 159 was another counter to the argument that trafficking only exists on a spectrum of good/bad, with law enforcement and criminals pitted against each other. Ram mentioned that he had also grown up working in sari factories, and continued to do so. In his eyes, this was a legitimate opportunity

9 “Nepal Jails Canadian Former UN Official for Sexually Abusing Boys,” *Guardian*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/09/nepal-jails-canadian-former-un-official-for-sexually-abusing-boys>.

10 Janakraj Sapkota, “Under the Guise of Humanitarian Aid, High-Profile Paedophiles Are Abusing Nepali Children,” *Kathmandu Post*, November 15, 2019, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/11/15/under-the-guise-of-humanitarian-aid-high-profile-paedophiles-are-abusing-nepali-children>.

11 <http://www.voiceofchildren.org.np/>.

12 Dan Archer, “How to Avoid the Pitfalls of Voluntourism,” *Spiegel*, August 18, 2016, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/tomorrow/voluntourism-when-a-helping-hand-becomes-a-burden-a-1107422.html>.

for his underage workforce to support their families. And just like the *kamlari* girls in chapter 6, their parents are the ones who entered into the agreement with him on a rolling annual basis.

Page 161: The “poverty does not end overnight here” quote is taken directly from Ram’s quote in panel 2 of p. 160. I wanted to try and demystify as much of the process of interviewing, writing, and reporting as possible as I geared up to show the inner workings of the Human Trafficking Vulnerability Project. The spreadsheet screenshot on the bottom half of the page shows how we categorized the different stories by type, format, and protagonist before allocating them into danger/empowerment or updating the script to fit the research template guidelines that I explain on p. 164.

Page 164: The poster was deliberately aimed at the negative, fear-based posters so often circulated by NGOs that depict children in terrible conditions, doing back-breaking work, or being subjected to abuse – you can see one example in the first panel of p. 165. I wanted to create a poster that offered an alternative, more optimistic outcome, hence splitting the sari table into a longer classroom desk and having a female teacher giving an English lesson. I had to keep the positive side on the right since I wanted the reading direction to register the negative side of things first, which made the perspective (of the board especially) a little awkward, but I think I got the result I wanted in the end. It was especially gratifying to see this rolled out around the wider Kathmandu area by CDS.

Page 165: The middle tier juxtaposes the positive crux moment of one of the research narratives with the same negative approach. I tried to keep both treatments as similar as possible in terms of length and layout so the comparison would be as close to like-for-like as we could achieve. A big shout-out to my amazing teammate Sarah Rich-Zendel with whom I spent so many hours debating scripts or cursing our survey devices when they (very often) failed to behave (see penultimate panel on p. 180).

Page 166: For a more in-depth breakdown of how I approach thumbnailing, see the special essay on my production process in the appendix.

Page 167, top tier: A recurring concern of mine throughout the book was that my interview questions and the subsequent responses were being mediated or filtered by my translators: see other notes on p. 53 and the prologue. I always tried to keep the translator the same gender as the interview subject to avoid falling foul of the sort of ingrained gendered power dynamics you can see in the third panel.

Middle tier: Without wanting to detract from the seriousness of the research project and my interviews, late in the book’s development I decided to include pages on some of the more humorous insights that I’d encountered during the project, and my attempts to learn Nepali certainly had its fair share of them. My limited budget meant that I often could only afford university students as language teachers, many of whom didn’t have the best knowledge of English. But in true Nepali style, rarely was I told that there was a problem or that they didn’t know the answer, much like asking for directions. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve been gladly steered the wrong way when lost simply because a friendly would-be Samaritan wouldn’t let the small matter of not knowing my final destination get in the way of offering me directions on how to get there. Full disclosure: I’m well aware that I reciprocated this well-intentioned cultural exchange as a language teacher myself, as you can see in the last panel on p. 168.

Page 169: Interestingly, this improvised format became an analog version of the slideshow that the BBC imposed on the comic that I published for them (see note on p. 26). You can just about make out the Nepali lettering in panel 2: the challenge of accounting for the different numbers of words and characters that different languages take to say the same thing was one that cropped up on many occasions throughout the project. As much as my spoken Nepali improved, sadly I never made any inroads on learning the written Devanagari (Sanskrit-derived) alphabet.

Middle tier, panel 2: You can make out in my hastily scrawled observations that the comics also served as a wonderful tool for bringing people together. I would often see shy, quieter participants slowly gain confidence from reading one or two captions aloud to the group, and then feel empowered enough to contribute to the group discussion about the story afterwards.

Page 173: The whole piloting experience was a real lesson in humility and appreciation of how audiences process visual material. It was invaluable to learn which methods were more effective than others, and which panels needed further clarification or embellishment (such as the second panel in the middle tier) to get the point across. For a more detailed breakdown of the piloting process and our takeaways, see Section 2(c) of the Appendix.

Page 176: By the time we were granted a meeting with Anuradha at Maiti Nepal, it felt like the project had come full circle: she was one of the most prominent voices on the topic, who was frequently courted by the carousel of would-be humanitarian celebrities (such as Demi Moore, whom I originally drew on panel 2 of p. 17).

Last panel: Indira actually founded the NGO Prisoners Assistance Nepal in 2000,¹³ five years prior to Pushpa's ECDC, which I featured on pp. 32–40. The sad reality of the NGO landscape nowadays is that fundraising and awareness-raising is as much about garnering likes and brand management on social media as it is on doing the field work. The algorithmic ouroboros works its magic and those who post more get more recognition. Old school stalwarts like Indira and so many others get overlooked simply because their work isn't as visible on online outlets easily accessible by Western audiences. The question remains: Should organizations play along to maintain public interest in their work or concentrate on doing the work itself? This is an altogether thornier matter in light of the increasing commodification of outrage amongst Western audiences, who are invited (on an almost daily basis) to display their allegiance to a cause with a T-shirt or raise money by publicly performing a stunt for charity, with minimal knowledge of exactly how the proceeds of their purchases or fundraising efforts will be spent. I tackled a similar issue in a comic on pink-washing for the *Nib* alongside educator Adam Bessie in 2014.¹⁴

Page 180: For a full breakdown, see the survey results in the appendix.

Page 183: Already in 2014 there was a great deal of coverage of the exploitation of Nepali migrant workers building the World Cup stadium in Qatar. More than 6,500 South Asian¹⁵ migrant

13 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indira_Ranamagar.

14 Adam Bessie and Dan Archer, "Pink Ribbon Envy: Living with an Uncool Cancer," Medium, September 30, 2014, <https://medium.com/the-nib/pink-ribbon-envy-living-with-an-uncool-cancer-f0ed4965fdb9>.

15 India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

workers died in the decade prior to the World Cup – an average of 12 workers a week since the announcement Qatar had won the bid in December 2010.¹⁶ A Qatari government official admitted that the number was between 400 and 500, despite earlier claiming it was as low as 3.¹⁷ Perhaps most shocking is the speed with which the global football-loving audience forgot the lives lost purely so that they could enjoy the 2022 World Cup.

Page 190: Sarah and I actually experienced a very faint tremor while conducting the pilot survey in the late summer of 2014, only several months prior to the devastating earthquake that took place in April 2015.

Page 191, panels 1 and 2: Messages such as this made the entire project worth the effort, having real-world impact on the lives of young girls who otherwise would not have thought twice about exposing themselves to very risky situations.

Page 192: Ending on these guidelines was more important to me than charting the arc of the research project or my own stay in Nepal. By including myself in these final panels I wanted to chart the process that I went through over the course of this project, while also underlining how the resources are all freely available online for anyone to use, regardless of their destination country. Certainly a lot of the stories and mechanisms of exploitation that I detailed in this book aren't exclusive to Nepal, and there are countless other countries that could benefit from a thoughtful, local-centric engagement with foreigners, provided they see it as an ongoing, reciprocal exchange and not a transactional journey that ends when they put their smartphone cameras away.

16 “Revealed: 6,500 Migrant Workers Have Died in Qatar since World Cup Awarded,” *Guardian*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/23/revealed-migrant-worker-deaths-qatar-fifa-world-cup-2022>.

17 Michael Page and Minky Worden, “Qatar World Cup Chief Publicly Admits High Migrant Death Tolls,” Human Rights Watch, November 30, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/30/qatar-world-cup-chief-publicly-admits-high-migrant-death-tolls>.