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Beyond the Text

Calais Again

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Abstract

Calais Again is a digital story recounting a young man, Anas' experience of returning to France for the first time after migrating to the United Kingdom as a separated asylum-seeking child. Produced using biographical narrative and participatory arts-based research approaches, *Calais Again* was created as a rare self-authored contribution to Anas' personal archive of migration documents, and as a resource for communicating the multiple and multi-layered journeys of asylum-seeking young people. In the context of COVID-19, the story additionally highlights how the pandemic is just one of many forces of ontological insecurity and constrained mobility in the lives of young forced migrants. While the project was commenced pre-pandemic, the editing and launch of the digital story took place remotely, presenting ethical, methodological and relational challenges, but also unanticipated affordances. In particular, the spectrum of options for differentiated presence enabled by online events – from anonymous observation to co-presentation – offers unique opportunities for navigating safeguarding and agency for youth researchers.
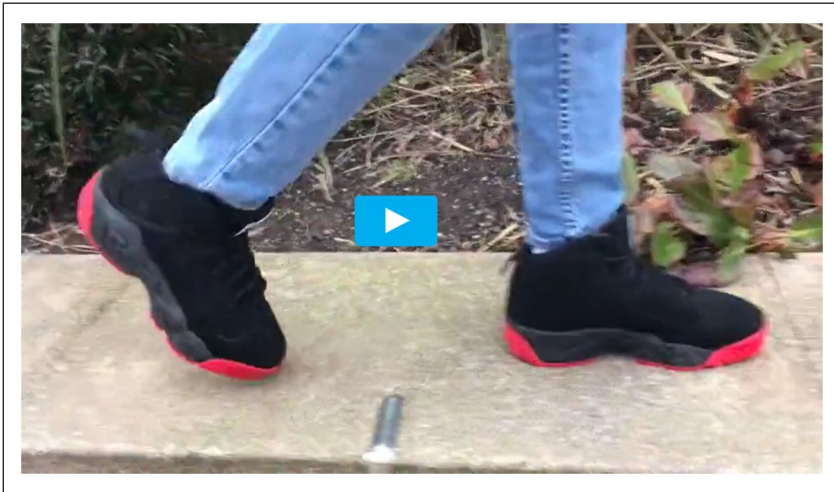
Keywords
digital story, participatory arts-based research, refugee, seeking asylum, youth

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Calais Again is a digital story recounting a young man, Anas', experience of returning to France for the first time after migrating to the UK as an asylum seeker. It was produced by Anas, community artist David Cường Nguyễn, and researcher Caitlin Nunn as part of a larger participatory action research collaboration between Caitlin and members of The Children's Society's Hope Group for young people who migrated to the UK as separated asylum-seeking children (Hope Group, 2020). Commenced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and completed and disseminated in lockdown, this project demonstrates the importance of trust, dialogue, and reflexivity in responding to disruptions in participatory arts-based research collaborations. It additionally identifies the unique affordances of online platforms for allowing youth researchers to mediate their involvement in disseminating their work.

Anas explains the origins of *Calais Again*:

> When I turned 18 and saved enough money, I went to France to visit my friends. When I came back to Hope Group afterwards, I was so excited to tell everyone about my journey. It is a beautiful story. I wanted to record what happened and how it felt so I can share it with my children in the future, and show other young people what is possible.

Thus, from its inception, Anas led the project. The first (pre-pandemic) phase involved Caitlin supporting Anas to capture his story using a biographical narrative approach that honoured not only what happened but also how he experienced and interpreted it (Chase, 2005). We sat together and Anas told the story, with Caitlin typing it out verbatim, occasionally offering prompts to fill gaps and aid clarity. Anas then took a printout of the story away and spent several weeks reading and re-reading it before we met to discuss what, if anything, to do with it.

Anas was attracted to digital story's capacity to represent both the emotions and dynamism of the narrative. Through editing together photographs, video, music, and voice,

Anas observes, 'it shows what's happening, the movement, the places. You were in that place and that's how you felt about it'. David, a community artist with whom we had both previously collaborated, joined the team to co-create the digital story. For several months pre-pandemic, Anas and David met regularly in-person to generate audio-visual content in a reflective, dialogic process that was simultaneously data generation, analysis, and representation. The central motif that emerged was movement – Anas walking, cars, and buses driving – highlighting the multiple journeys, physical and personal, undertaken in the story. Working with David, Anas reanimated his narrative through an audio-recorded dramatic reading that allowed him to communicate the emotional journey through shifts in tempo, volume, and intonation.

At the time of the first UK national lockdown in late March 2020, David and Anas had finished recording the audio and video but were still sourcing photographs and were yet to commence editing. Moving online meant that it was no longer possible to do this work together. Instead, David did the editing, guided by conversations with Anas, who continued taking photos, and directing his friends in France to do the same. While lockdown meant that Anas lost the opportunity to learn how to edit, he felt that he had a lot of control over the process, and he was confident in providing critical feedback. 'It wasn't hard', Anas says, 'because we had built trust' through prior in-person collaboration. Thus, while Anas gave formal consent to participate in the research, in accordance with Manchester Metropolitan University's institutional ethics process, our collaboration was shaped by 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). As Flicker and MacEntee (2020) note, digital stories require an iterative consent process, where each stage of the work is subject to reflection, dialogue, and agreement. Decisions concerning if and how Anas used his story, name, voice, and image, and with whom the result was to be shared, were led by Anas and supported by reflexive discussion with Caitlin and David (Lomax, 2015; Wiles et al., 2012).

The process of creating *Calais Again* was as important as the outcome. The widely recognised power of sharing one's story is amplified in the context of forced migration (Alexandra, 2008). Young people seeking asylum frequently cede authorial control over their stories. They are required to produce certain kinds of self-representations to access services and pursue asylum claims (Erel, 2007), and their lives are often narrated by others – social workers, foster carers, immigration officials, charities, activists, media – in formats designed to fulfil bureaucratic and political objectives. In this context, a reflexive, youth-led process was crucial, enabling Anas to produce a rare self-authored contribution to his personal archive of migration documents.

Calais Again captures a transformative experience for Anas; his first time exercising his legal right to free movement in and out of the UK, having gained indefinite leave to remain and turned 18. The content of the digital story – addressing the variously forced, constrained, and free movement of separated asylum-seeking young people – took on additional significance during lockdown, highlighting that the pandemic is just one of many forces producing ontological insecurity and constrained mobility in the lives of young forced migrants. During lockdown, however, there was a different feeling for Anas. 'Once you have your freedom, it's hard to lose it' he reflects, but this time he was part of a national community. As he says in *Calais Again*: 'I have papers':

> In lockdown it's hard, not to go to any places, but in the end it helps you to know that it's for a short time. You try to be patient . . . Back then, you don't know when your future was going to happen. You don't know if you might have to go back. You just worried . . . You can't tell yourself that it will be good, that everything will be fine.

The pandemic and associated lockdowns had a particularly significant effect on the dissemination of the digital story. Sharing arts-based research created by or with refugee-background young people is always a fraught process (Nunn, 2020). Do we safeguard our co-researchers by 'preaching to the choir', with the concomitant effect of limiting their capacity to reach new audiences, or do we share the work more widely, with greater risk of exposing the artworks and the young people to negative responses? In online dissemination, both the opportunities and risks are more pronounced (Lomax, 2015). The highly politicised nature of public discussions about seeking asylum in the UK, and the role of social media in fomenting anti-migrant sentiment, meant that we approached sharing the digital story with great care. Given the personal nature of *Calais Again*, Anas was nervous about sharing it with an unknown audience, while Caitlin and David felt a duty of care to limit Anas' potential exposure to anti-asylum seeker hostilities.

We collectively decided to launch the film at a screening on Microsoft Teams as part of Refugee Week 2020. This relatively secure platform enabled us to create a safe space to share the work with, and receive feedback from, a select audience of refugee service providers and migration scholars. Through this process, we identified an unanticipated benefit of online events for disseminating participatory arts-based research outputs with young people. In contrast to live events, where attendance and participation renders youth researchers highly visible, online fora allow for flexible and dynamic engagement. Throughout the project, Anas has chosen how, and how much, to present himself: his first but not second name, his voice and body, but not his face. This was fundamental to him feeling safe to share his story. The spectrum of options for *differentiated presence* enabled by online events – from anonymous observation to co-presentation – enabled Anas to maintain this sense of control and safety. For the launch event, this meant being invisible to the audience by attending with audio and video off and using a pseudonym for his screen name. The warm reception to the work reassured Anas and gave him the confidence to speak – with his camera off – at a subsequent screening. Thus, the opportunity for differentiated presence scaffolded Anas' increasing skills and confidence in presenting the work, with benefits for both him and our audiences. Crucially, it is by virtue of this process that we are ready to share *Calais Again* in Sociological Research Online.

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Author biographies

Anas is a young Manchester resident who arrived in the UK as a separated asylum seeker. He is a student at Manchester College and enjoys learning new things. Anas is a happy person who loves playing football and helping other people.

David Cường Nguyễn is a community artist with more than 20 years' experience co-creating theatre, writing, and digital works with diverse young people. He has worked as artist-researcher on a number of participatory arts-based research projects with refugee-background young people in the UK and Australia.

Caitlin Nunn is a Research Fellow at the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies. Her research is located at the intersection of Refugee Studies and Youth Studies, focusing on the lived experiences of refugee-background young people. Much of her research is produced in collaboration with young people, youth-engaged organisations, and artists, using participatory and arts-based approaches.