

Portraits of Change: Photo-Storytelling Across Bangladesh, China and Australia

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Ripples

I stood in the sweltering humidity of the cramped classroom watching a 10-year-old boy in a crumpled white school uniform stand before his class, his hands gripping the first photograph he had ever taken. Speaking movingly, he told its story, showing him and his friends collecting rubbish in his neighbourhood, the second-largest slum in Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh.

Five months later, in a large, freezing 6th floor classroom of a towering university complex in Hangzhou, China, I watched a 19-year-old Chinese media studies student gaze at the photo-story from this Bangladeshi boy, and write about her feelings of responsibility and ideas for taking action arising in response.

Four months after this, I sheltered in a white marquee which warded off the baking Australian sun at the Sustainable Living Festival in Melbourne, deep in conversation with a 65-year-old environmental activist, talking about how he had been re-inspired by a photo-story from a young woman in Beijing which depicted a little boy looking through homemade glasses constructed from drinking straws – showing what it is like to see like a butterfly...

These brief, powerful moments were flashpoints of connection that passed through this project like waves, with their ripples spreading far beyond their initial creation. These waves can be traced back to their collective source—a photographic action-research project I founded in 2016, and within this to three areas of influence in particular: *environmental behaviour change*; *cross-cultural story telling*; and *environmental art*. These influences have informed my own evolving efforts to make positive, creative environmental change over the past 20 years. The opening descriptions reflect the complexity, depth and potential of growing connections between communities across different countries that are thousands of kilometres apart, and between differences in culture, economic development and environmental impact.

The Seed

Trained in art photography, I initially hoped that my own photography would inspire positive environmental change. However I soon felt uncomfortable with putting my energy towards conventional nature photography, which tends to rely on simplified and polarised emotions of either *fear* in images of despoiled landscapes or *hope* in the form of pristine

wilderness (Manzo 206) that can serve to reproduce essentialised ideas of nature and culture which are becoming increasingly untenable in the Anthropocene era. In contrast, I gradually found through research, and my own grassroots projects that participatory photography methods—such as photovoice—have the potential to generate rich locally-grounded photo-stories which open up deeper engagements with the complexities of nature-culture relations (Gustafson and Al-Sumait 9). It is important to acknowledge here that ideas of ‘nature’ are culturally determined (Eder and Ritter 7; Ginn and Demeritt 300). This is especially pertinent to this inquiry as it involves an exploration of how participants from different cultural contexts visualise ‘nature’; however, coming from a methodological focus, a deeper analysis of these constructions themselves is beyond its scope.

The Project

In this four-year PhD action-research project I explored how positive-themed environmental photo-stories can provide alternative perspectives on human and ecological wellbeing and inspire environmental behavioural change. These ‘photo-stories’—a photograph with descriptive or reflective text—were created by urban youth through workshops in Bangladesh, China and Australia. This participatory action-research technique, known as ‘photovoice’ (Wang et al. 79) has been increasingly used in social and action research over the last thirty years, and shifts image authorship from the usual privileged outsiders (such as professional film-makers and photographers) to communities themselves, providing spaces for self-representation. However, these methods are used rarely with environmental foci, and are extremely uncommon in a multi-country context (Bennett and Dearden 5). I was therefore curious to explore how these participant-generated photo-stories could engage with people across different cultures and contexts, and ultimately whether they could help inspire environmental behavioural change across these substantive differences.

As I experimented with photovoice techniques, my overall inquiry developed into three related action-research orientations: **adapt**, **visualise** and **influence**. These orientations were connected through practice-led research, which investigated how to **adapt** photovoice methods through the iterative workshop processes, how to **visualise** the photographic story outputs and how these stories **influence** individual environmental behaviour in multi-sited contexts, through a design-based participatory action research approach.

In this article I focus on extracts from my PhD dissertation, in particular a relational-material analysis of the above research orientations. Relational materialism is associated with a theoretical turn away from dualism and the privileging of human subjectivity over other entities in humanist traditions, towards an animate, immanent field of relational-material relations (Iovino and Oppermann 450). Cresswell summarises some of its

principles: (1) the world can be understood as relational rather than essentialist, (2) things are fluid not stable; (3) life is defined widely as humans/with/plus (97). This approach challenges dominant models of empirical research methodologies that construe ‘data’ as an ‘inert and indifferent mass waiting to be in/formed and calibrated by our analytic acumen or our coding systems’ (MacLure 660). Understood relationally, research methods become instead ‘a distributed, immanent field of sensible processuality within which creative variations give rise to modifications and movements of thinking’ (McCormack 25). In this project this approach is expressed via a *horizontal, relational* over a *vertical, hierarchical* approach to analysing the photo-stories and their creation methods.

Relational materialism can thus challenge the primacy of human agency in the unfolding of participatory practices, showing how other actors—material (photo-stories, material processes) and ecological (plants, animals and natural environments)—both influence and are influenced by the research process.

Participatory Methods – Adapt

Thinking relationally provides scope to consider how the photovoice methods themselves evolved throughout the project, and how this has in turn affected the photo-stories and their engagement with the world. I provide a brief overview below of a selection of methods developed and adapted through the action-research. I conducted 79 photovoice workshops across Australia, Bangladesh and China to explore the ways in which these methods may be adapted in the multi-sited context (Figure 1 and 2).



Figure 1 and 2: Photovoice workshop, Dhaka

Gathering more than 500 photo-stories that participants created in the workshops, I explored different methods of analysing a cross section to explore how environmental behaviours were visualised across the three countries (Figure 3, Figure 4).



Figure 3: Participant with photo-story, Dhaka Figure 4: Photo-stories, Dhaka.

I experimented with various methods of facilitating public engagement with the photo-stories, including exhibitions, interviews, and group projects to assess their potential to influence positive environmental change (Figure 5, Figure 6).



Figure 5: Exhibition, Melbourne

Figure 6: Exhibition, Dhaka

Gathering Stories

When initiating this project, I held the naïve belief that the creation of environmental photo-stories would be the simple matter of inviting people to photograph what they saw around them. Yet when I did this, I was often first met with confusion, and subsequently with many photo-stories documenting rubbish bins and trees, without any deeper context or meaning. It was only after developing the workshop structures further, with greater emphasis put on the role of the participant's relationality with their own physical place and individual creativity in the process, that deeper and more complex photo-stories emerged. In these stories, participants became more visible by physically including themselves as the role of change agent, *laterally* alongside non-human others, rather than a *vertical*, Cartesian documentation of 'environmental objects' as separate 'things'.

This process emphasises that stories cannot be simply asked of people—instead the story gathering process needs to nourish and nurture both the storyteller and the story, and the researcher must be prepared to be changed through these bi-relational encounters. In this way stories can be thought of as the *generative collusion* between witnessing and creating;

stories emerge as a process of relational becoming, spanning the processes of creation to engagement, even across vast geographic, cultural, and ideological divides.

Material Practices



Every time looking the photo, I always have a feeling of loneliness. It like a kid who is homeless, although it is just a small plastic bag. Maybe we can do something for it, like taking it to the Recyclable Garbage Can, and it will be reborn.

Figure 7: Photo-story, Beijing

Researchers and activists started to use photovoice over thirty years ago with film cameras, and my own first experimentations were in 2004 when I taught film photography in Kolkata, India with donated cameras. A decade and a half later we are now surrounded by digital photography, with screen-based images having far greater geographic reach on one hand, but a much lighter material presence on the other. Given this ubiquity, it would seem that image-making and sharing could be more easily done online. Although I initially thought this would be the case, I soon found it was not as straightforward. For instance, I took donated camera-phones from Melbourne to Dhaka, where they were crucial in giving children in ‘slum’ areas the ability to create their own photo-stories. At the same time the university students I taught barely a kilometre away were happy to share and discuss their photos using smartphones and Facebook. The partner organisation in Beijing actually found these eight-year-old phones amusingly antiquated—their youth participants shot with the latest handsets and shared them instantly through *WeChat*.

Thus while the ‘digital divide’ between communities is very present, and does indeed impact on how images can be created and shared (Van Dijk and Hacker 316), one approach did not prove to be *vertically* superior to the other—rather the technology had to

be *laterally* responsive, or ‘colluding’ with the specific participants’ local needs and relationships to form generative relationships.



Figure 8: Participants using cameras for the first time, Dhaka



Figure 9: Participants photographing in Korail slum area, Dhaka

Photo-story Insights – Visualise

Moving from these participatory processes to their photo-story outputs, the latter provided highly visible and powerful insights. I analysed these as visual data first with content analysis for a broad overview of the photo-stories themes, then used the relational-material approach to focus on specific human/non-human relationships.

Content Analysis – Breadth

I used a standard visual content-analysis approach, consisting of counting subject frequencies in a photo-story selection (Rose 54). *People* and *plants* were the most common subjects, with participants' captions emphasising their importance, suggesting that plants are emblematic of 'nature' and the standard bearer for its protection, particularly in urban areas that have significantly degraded urban natural environments, such as in Bangladesh and China. *Transport* was the next most popular theme in Bangladesh and Australia, showing differences around the role that transport choices make across different levels of economic development. For example, the photo-story pair below shows a contrast between 'post-material' motivation arising from an individual environmentally sustainable choice by the Australian subject, while the Bangladeshi rickshaw driver is unlikely to have the privilege of being able to make such environmental choices.



Liz has sold her car and now cycles as her main form of travel. She has just bought this bike trailer to do the shopping.

Figure 10: Post-material cycling, Melbourne



We should all use Rickshaws. Rickshaws don't pollute the air or the atmosphere. It doesn't emit black smoke. We can use this as an example for a cleaner environment.

Figure 11: Rickshaw livelihood cycling, Dhaka

Ground waste and its mitigation strategies—predominantly street bins—were also common, and a particular favourite of Bangladeshi primary and secondary-age participants. Several Bangladeshi participants wrote lamenting the 'dirty' state of their streets compared to 'clean' Australia, showing the persistent power of visual global narratives of economic development and their relationship to shame and aspiration.

Relational Analysis – Depth

Having sketched some of the key themes, I focused on the most common underlying theme of human/non-human connection using a relative materialist analysis that draws on Actor Network Theory (Latour 28) and Multi-Species Ethnography (Ogden et al. 6). By focusing on the photo-stories from a relational perspective, I attempted to look beyond specific human perception, attitudes and agency within the photo-stories and consider instead relational perspectives that are co-constituted together with more-than-human (e.g. plant, animal, environmental) and technological actors within the photo-stories' composition and content.

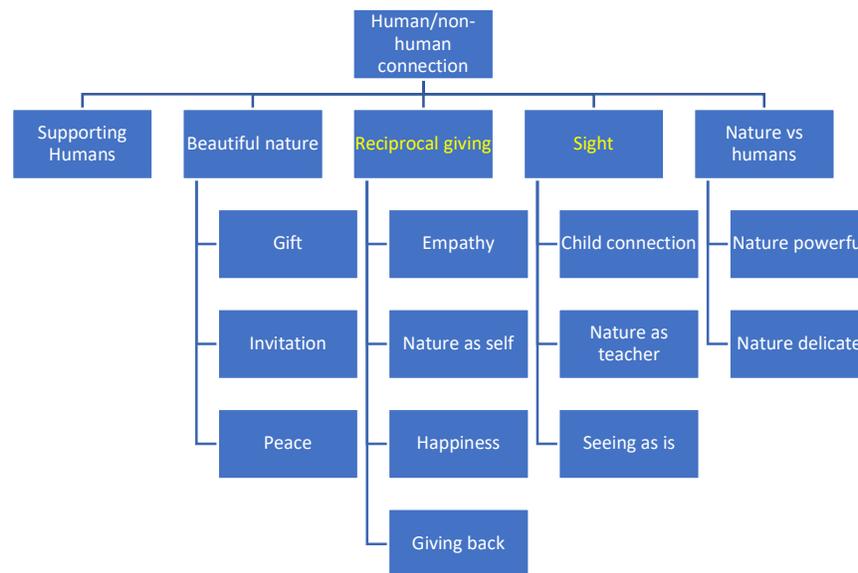


Figure 12: Human-nonhuman subthemes, analysis highlighted in yellow

I broke down the overarching human-nonhuman theme into subthemes (Figure 12), of which I analyse two below—hello ‘reciprocal giving’ and ‘sight’ (highlighted in yellow).



Figure 13: Non-human – reciprocal giving subtheme

Analysing the sub-theme ‘reciprocal giving’ (Figure 13) relationally offers perspectives on how human and natural subjects are co-constructed in relation to each other. It is useful to consider here the relational materialist concept of *intra-activity*—describing the dynamic relationship between an organism (human or non-human) and its environment, which are understood not to have clearly defined boundaries, but rather are always in a state of intra-activity—of *becoming* together (Barad 152) or in actor network terms: the dynamic configuration of human-nonhuman assemblages.

In the middle photo-story, the participant, by speaking from a non-human position—‘I am environment’—invites the viewer to displace the assumed human agent: a *vertical* arrangement of subject onto the object, and to consider agency through the assemblage of human-environment: a *horizontal* arrangement of relationality (Hultman and Lenz Taguchi 529). These mutual engagements by both human and non-human actors therefore serve to co-constitute their relations by opening up a more complex space around how agency acts *in, around, and through* the images.

In the photo-story on the left the participant shows damaged plants and writes directly from an empathetic perspective that attempts to relate to the plant’s experience as another living being who experiences pain. As empathy still is considered largely from an anthropocentric lens within ethnography (Malcolm et al. 231) these new forms of visualisations are especially important for opening up spaces for empathetic human-plant encounters.

The photo-story on the right chronicles the photographer’s gesture of supporting nature in the form of providing flowers for bees. Continuing on from the previous example, it is

language that opens up spaces for encounter; here by using ‘her’ instead of ‘it’ for the insect she represents the latter with greater subjective depth. Thinking through the lens of intra-action, whereby each ontological unit is actually a phenomenon in a process of becoming with others in the network (Maurstad et al. 323), each of the entities in the photographer-plant-bee network also come into play and intra-act together, invoking a reciprocal depth lacking in common forms of aestheticised nature representations.



Figure 14: Nature-sight subtheme

Approaching the three photo-stories in the second sub-theme of ‘*sight*’ (Figure 14) relationally invites the viewer to see from different ‘vantage points’ that open up alternative and embodied knowledges (Alam et al. 3). A specific example I use is Bennett’s concept of ‘enchantment’—to be transfixed by an embodied encounter that connects us to the ‘*wondrous complexity of life*’ (Bennett 110), which opens up new possibilities of relating (Krzywoszynska 8). The first photograph expresses children’s connection to nature, showing children looking intently at nature: one via technology (cell phone), the other directly. In both instances the actual nature as object of the children’s gaze is difficult to see—it is rather the act of *seeing itself* which is shown, illustrating the networked assemblage of *child-cell phone-flower* through which this seeing is enacted. This act of seeing can be read as enchantment; by looking at the children in these enchanted states, we are similarly invited to join this state ourselves—interrupting our detached spectatorship.

The second photograph explores the theme of nature as teacher through camouflage, where the photograph’s composition shows directly this effect through framing the toad at a distance where its presence is only just discernible. By having the actual visual experience of this camouflage affect ourselves we are again invited to see from the position of the child playing hide and seek; this time to experience a different vantage point that destabilises our own human gaze in the asymptotic moments just before we discover the frog.

The third photograph strikingly demonstrates the non-human gaze by inviting us to see through a butterfly's eyes. We can simultaneously be *seen* by the boy through his toilet-roll-and-straw apparatus (just as a butterfly may see us), and we can *see* him through these butterfly eyes ourselves. Both ways invite the human viewer to phenomenologically step out of the anthropocentric position, and into a visual world of mutually-acknowledged reciprocal relations (Abram 89).

In summary, this mixed-methods approach used both content and relational visual analysis to offer alternative avenues for exploring how the photo-stories visualised environmental behaviours and relationships. The content approach was useful for mapping the broad taxonomy of photo-stories; a prism for splitting the photo-story collection into a diverse thematic spectrum, however I still maintained my own anthropocentric analytical approaches. By then switching to a relational analysis, I was able to re-consider my own ways of seeing the photo-stories, and how these in turn related to what constituted 'environmental behaviour'. Each photo-story thus became its own prism refracting (and diffracting) these lateral relations, inviting different ways of seeing, that in turn helped me visual environmental behaviour, and the subjectivity and agency behind it, in new and expanded ways.

Relational Practices – Influence

But while technology enables storytelling and image-making in these different ways, and is such a visible and crucial part of the image-making process, I found that it was actually the *relational* engagement with people that made all the difference—face-to-face connections through embodied workshop processes, with physical photographs held, handed around, and poured over collectively. While the images themselves can indeed travel further and faster online, they rely on these relational processes for their production, which are often invisible and de-contextualised when digital mediums are operated individually, rather than collectively.



Figure 15: Participants discussing the ideas behind their photos, Dhaka



Figure 16: Participants discussing their photo-story ideas, Beijing

Through experimenting with the audience's engagement with the photo-stories, I found that using them as springboards for dynamic, embodied conversations or dialogues in interviews led to participant's deeper reflection and elucidation of the connections between themselves and the photo-stories. This increased the likelihood of their commitment to

altered environmental behaviours more readily than if they simply viewed static images exhibited physically or online.

By organising *interactive* photography exhibitions, I tested out different forms of public engagement and ways of measuring the photo-stories' impact. The exhibitions I ran in Melbourne generated only limited engagement, which highlighted the barriers to deeper participation when local ownership of photo-stories is lacking. Conversely, the exhibitions in Dhaka and Beijing were actually much more engaging, as I supported local volunteers to organise the exhibitions—of their own communities' photo-stories—themselves.

In contrast to exhibitions, interview methods allowed for deeper one-on-one participant engagement and direct emphasis on influencing environmental behaviour by supporting participants to develop personal environmental action commitments. Finally, the development of processes to support participants in their formation of group environmental action projects demonstrated how multi-sited photovoice methods could be combined with other participatory processes, such as community mapping, to support and inspire larger scale, collective environmental behavioural change activities. These kinds of emergent participatory processes are symptomatic of the broader importance of relationships in community engagement projects.

To explore the connections *between* project sites, I developed a composite photovoice method called 'photo-pen pals' through a multi-session workshop series beginning in Melbourne, that then connected with Dhaka through the local students who created letters and photo-stories in response. While I had ambitions to connect the two classes via video-conferencing, technical and time-zone limitations meant that the best I could manage was a video walk through of a local Dhaka market for Melbourne-based primary students—with the stark differences in this 'everyday' place captivating the students.

Relationality and Capacity

Sustained engagement with communities can only be developed effectively by building relationships with trusted partners. *Portraits of Change* involved working with nineteen different local partner organisations of varying size and structure across the three countries. Without these communities' connections, generosity of time, local expertise and trust in the project's vision, the project would not have got off the ground. This observation invites the ongoing question of how to adequately reciprocate these efforts by various communities. Providing the photo-stories and secondary visual materials (such as posters and video documentation), as well as connections and training, proved to be locally useful. Crowd-funding from communities in Australia enabled me to financially compensate local Bangladeshi volunteers, however this remains an ongoing challenge, especially in the context of asymmetrical environmental impacts. As with most community-based projects,

there was a lack of capacity in terms of time and resources. Internships, crowdfunding and volunteering became entry points for interested people to contribute funds, ideas, or labour to the project across the three countries. Connections made through these processes enabled meaningful engagement and dissemination with the photo-stories far beyond their initial site. However, the lack of ongoing resourcing (the speculative orientation precluded governmental or philanthropic funding) means that the future of the project continuing is highly uncertain.



Figure 17: Participant shows her favourite photo-story, Dhaka



Figure 18: Participant shows one of her favourite photo-stories, Beijing

Concluding Remarks

At its core, this project is about sharing grassroots environmental stories across and between cultures. Through the **adapt**, **visualise** and **influence** research orientations I learnt that people need to be nurtured and supported to share their stories, that physical presence and material processes are crucial for engagement, and that ongoing relationship development—across all aspects of story creation and dissemination—is foundational for this work. Successful storytelling across difference relies on various types of *generative collusion*—between witnessing and creation, allowing the cultivation, and activation of empathy. I found empathy in this context was the ability for one to see through the eyes of another human, in a distant world, or to see glimpses from non-human perspectives, in one's own world. My hopes are that, through nurturing and developing these kinds of storytelling, we can help accelerate the crucial steps from empathy to environmental action.



Waste is everywhere! I don't want to waste anymore. So I am taking these coconut shells to reuse for many different purposes. One of my teachers told me once about recycling of used stuffs. Instead of throwing these shells in the garbage, I will make something useful out of it. Such as I can use it as plate, or planting small plants on it, keeping it on the roof as an umbrella. We can stop buying firewood and use these shells as fuel. I am so excited to take this away and start recycling.

Figure 18: Photo-story, Dhaka

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All photographs except for photo-stories taken by Michael Chew.

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