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**Drawing out of detention: The transnational drawing practices of eaten fish, refugee cartoonist**

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# Drawing out of Detention: The Transnational Drawing Practices of Eaten Fish, Refugee Cartoonist

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## Abstract

This article examines the drawings of Eaten Fish, an Iranian asylum seeker who became an internationally renowned cartoonist during the five years he was imprisoned in Australia's notorious Manus Island detention centre. Many of Eaten Fish's cartoons resist classification into the publishing genres established for comics, such as graphic narratives, comic strips and single-panel cartoons. Instead, his art is best understood as embodying a set of transnational drawing practices that connect his work with that of other cartoonists and artists across the world. This article proposes a framework of four types of drawing practices: Indexical Drawing, Reflexive Drawing, Drawing as Reportage, and Rhetorical Drawing. These modes of drawing each have their unique political dimensions, and were deployed by Eaten Fish and other cartoonists to bring light to the inhumane conditions on Manus Island, protest the

imprisonment of asylum seekers there, and grow a transnational alliance that eventually brought Eaten Fish to freedom.

## Eaten Fish: refugee cartoonist

The cartoons and drawings of Eaten Fish demonstrate the potential of comics for maintaining subjectivity and subjecthood within dehumanizing conditions. Eaten Fish is the pen name of Ali Dorani, an Iranian asylum seeker who was imprisoned in indefinite detention on Manus Island by the Australian government for five years. Dorani's comics connected him with a network of artists and other cartoonists who helped bring international attention to the human rights abuses perpetuated on Manus Island, and served important cultural tools to help Australian citizens reflect on their position in a system that makes those abuses possible.

These autobiographical cartoons are remarkable because conditions that Eaten Fish endured on Manus Island were in many ways in direct opposition to the cultural function of auto/biography. Comics are full of auto/biographical narratives of imprisonment and escape, from the Holocaust survivors of *Maus* to the biographical account of a kidnapping in Duy Delisle's *Hostage* (2016) or the flight to cultural freedom in *Persepolis*, and these stories neatly fulfill the generic function of biography as defined by Ron Wilson, of a "tormented journey towards coherent unity, striking personality and expressive selfhood".<sup>1</sup> However, while held in indefinite detention in a black site, Dorani faced disunity and erasure of both narrative and identity. In contrast to *Hostage*, where Delisle uses panels, narration and sequential images to recount, more than fifteen years after the fact, three months that Christophe André was held captive in 1997, Dorani's comics, drawn over years of captivity

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, "Producing American Selves", 105.

in remote island prisons, take place in a temporal stasis. They defy the narrative component of “graphic narratives” because they depict the dehumanized conditions of detention where asylum seekers were kept indefinitely -- life denied narrative. Dorani’s drawings are mostly discrete drawings and pages, without panels, without progression. Some of his comics are single scenes teeming with details, while others show his avatar caught in a loop or inescapable situation. He has published drawings that resemble political cartoons, and others that are notebook doodles which hint at the horror behind their creation.



(Figure 1: One of Eaten Fish’s cartoons, drawn on Manus Island. Image copyright Ali Dorani, used with permission.)

They are also remarkable because they depict life in what Suvendrini Perera defines as the Pacific Black Sites, “sites of non-visibility, rather than invisibility, persistently calling attention to that which is hidden, disappeared, forbidden, or redacted within.” Given the circumstances of their creation, it is remarkable that they found an audience at all, but they have been important in bringing attention to the dehumanising conditions of Australia’s black

sites. This article will instead focus on understanding how his autobiographical drawing practices inspired and became part of a transnational movement of cartoonists and activists devoted to bringing light to the black sites. This is an example of how “communities have drawn on art as a way to represent their otherwise silenced viewpoints and in order to embody and materialise their acts of resistance and protest”.<sup>2</sup> In order to understand Eaten Fish’s cartoons it is important to discuss how he came to Manus Island and how his work became known first within Australia and then internationally.

## Drawing out of Detention

Ali Dorani was a young man who fled Iran and attempted to seek asylum in Australia in May, 2013. His journey included first a flight to Indonesia, where he estimates he stayed for 40-42 days, and then a trip in a cramped truck to the beach, where a rickety fishing boat awaited to take him and about 50 others across to Australia. After 52 hours at sea, the asylum-seekers were intercepted by the Australian Navy and taken to a detention centre on Christmas Island. Dorani first felt safe in detention but expected it to only last a month or two. Instead, he was on Christmas Island for six months, until that centre was closed when the Australian government introduced a policy that asylum seekers who arrived by boat would be processed and settled in Papua New Guinea (PNG) or Nauru, but not Australia.<sup>3</sup> Dorani was the last person moved from Christmas Island to the PNG Manus Island detention centre.<sup>4</sup>

Drawing served several purposes for Dorani, He initially began drawing as a coping method for managing his obsessive compulsive disorder after nine months of detention, three of them

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<sup>2</sup> Deathscapes, “Humanising what has been dehumanised”, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Karlsen and Phillips, “Developments in Australian refugee”

<sup>4</sup> Cheung and Dorani, “Ali Dorani: Iranian cartoonist”.

spent on Manus. Dorani found that drawing helped focus his attention on something other than germs, although this rudimentary therapy was not without its own risks. He was not allowed paper or pens, so he had to steal from the detention centre staff. “I had one paper and one pen,” he said, “and I could make no mistakes.” Eventually, he wanted to share his work with the other asylum seekers in the camp and he started distributing his drawings out of his tent on Manus “like a newspaper”, although this was still contained within the bubble of the black site.<sup>5</sup> The possibility that this might change arrived when after a year on Manus, the prisoners gained permission to use the internet, once a week each, for 40 minutes (although Dorani says 30 minutes of that time was often spent trying to get the computer to connect). To share his work with Australian citizens, Dorani took photos of his drawings with a borrowed cell phone, and when he was able to get online he sent them out, virtual messages in a bottle. By his account, he sent his drawings to thousands of people and received no responses, until one of his messages found its way to poet and activist Janet Galbraith, who was organizing an exhibition of artwork by asylum seekers. Galbraith connected Dorani to a network of artists that included asylum seekers, refugees, and activists.

It was through Galbraith that Eaten Fish’s work was shown in Australia for the first time as part of an exhibition, “Our Beautiful Names,” held in a church hall in Castlemaine, Victoria.<sup>6</sup> Through Galbraith he also began a correspondence with popular cartoonist Andrew Marlton of *The Guardian*, who publishes under the pen name “First Dog on the Moon.” Dorani was featured as the headlining artist of a second exhibition, “Writing Through Fences: A Gallery of Art and Words,” held in the town hall of Kyneton, Victoria, that October, where Marlton gave an opening address.<sup>7</sup> Dorani’s emergence into the fringe artworld of Australian asylum

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<sup>5</sup> Dorani and Zhal, *Solvberget* podcast #107: Ali Dorani.

<sup>6</sup> Galbraith, “Our Beautiful Names”

<sup>7</sup> Galbraith, “Writing Through Fences”

seeker artists highlights how artistic practices are common within asylum seeker and refugee communities, and how these practices are often emmeshed with activism.

Working with sympathetic Australian artist/activists like Marlton and Galbraith helped Dorani to develop his voice and reach an audience beyond Manus Island, but this did not immediately garner international attention for Eaten Fish. Selections of Eaten Fish's work were published online in November, 2015, in an article for *New Matilda*, an Australian, life-wing news website and on the blog of "Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites."<sup>8</sup> Although the editors of these sites had endeavoured to redact all traces of Eaten Fish's identity from his drawings, Dorani identified himself in the *New Matilda* article by commenting on it directly from his personal Facebook account: "Hi My Name is Eaten Fish Thanks for Sharing My Cartoons." Nestled between a few short, sympathetic posts from readers and bots advertising day trading, his message seems to have passed without notice.<sup>9</sup> This should not be surprising, given the tremendous resources invested by the Australian government to nullify the voices of asylum detainees.

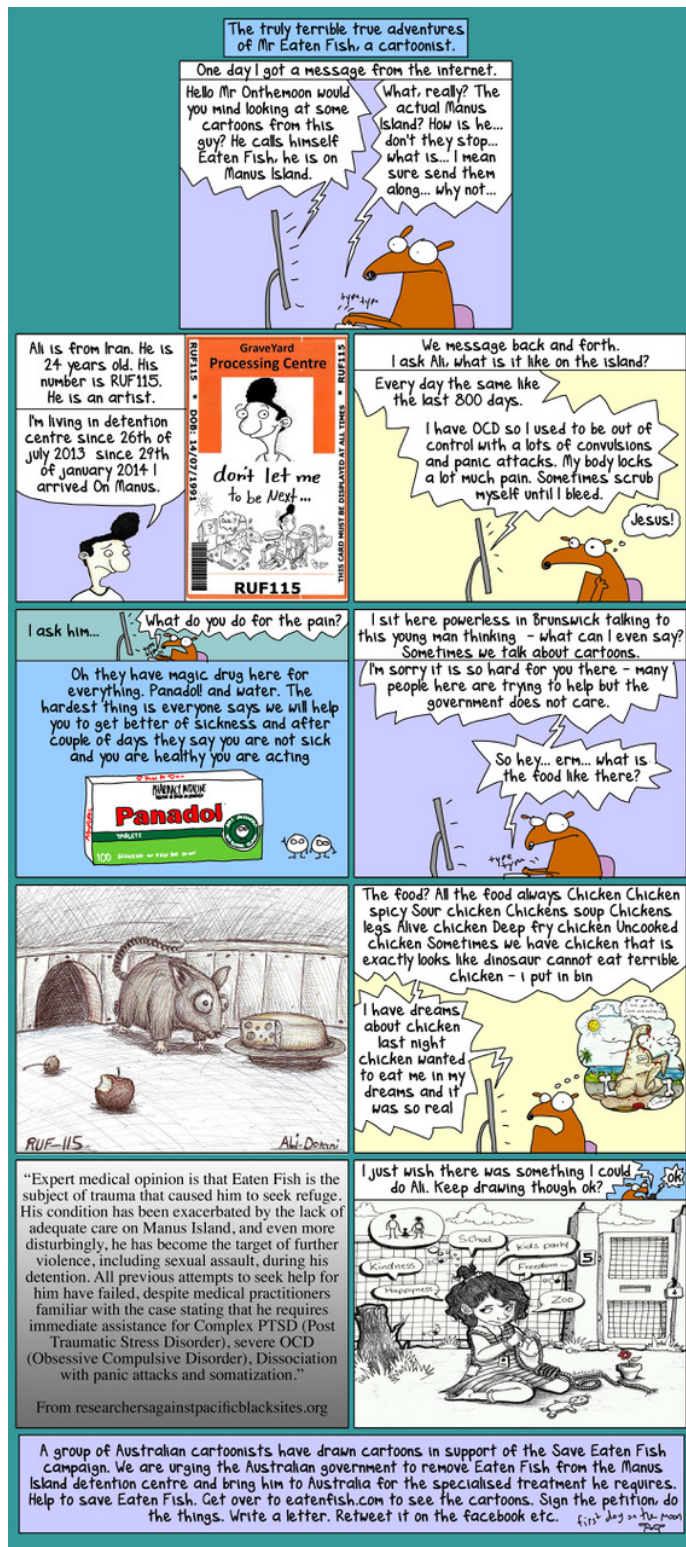
In July, 2016 Dorani and his supporters organised a campaign to raise awareness about his condition. Professors Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese published a scholarly analysis of Dorani's artwork on the "Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites" website, while Marlton published a "First Dog on the Moon" comic strip about Eaten Fish in *The Guardian*, which included examples of Dorani's artwork and quoted Perera and Pugliese.<sup>10</sup> Marlton also helped to set up a website, [Eatenfish.com](http://Eatenfish.com), which described Eaten Fish's situation and dozens of cartoons by other Australian cartoonists in support of him.

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<sup>8</sup> Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites, "Gallery – Eaten Fish"; Eaten Fish, "Cartoons from Detention".

<sup>9</sup> Eaten Fish, "Cartoons from Detention".

<sup>10</sup> Marlton, "The Terrible True Story".



(Figure 2: The First Dog on the Moon comic strip about Eaten Fish, first published in *The Guardian*. Image copyright Andrew Marlton, used with permission.)

As intended, this advocacy brought additional attention to Eaten Fish’s plight from journalists, activists and the public. In August, the Cartoonist Rights Network International



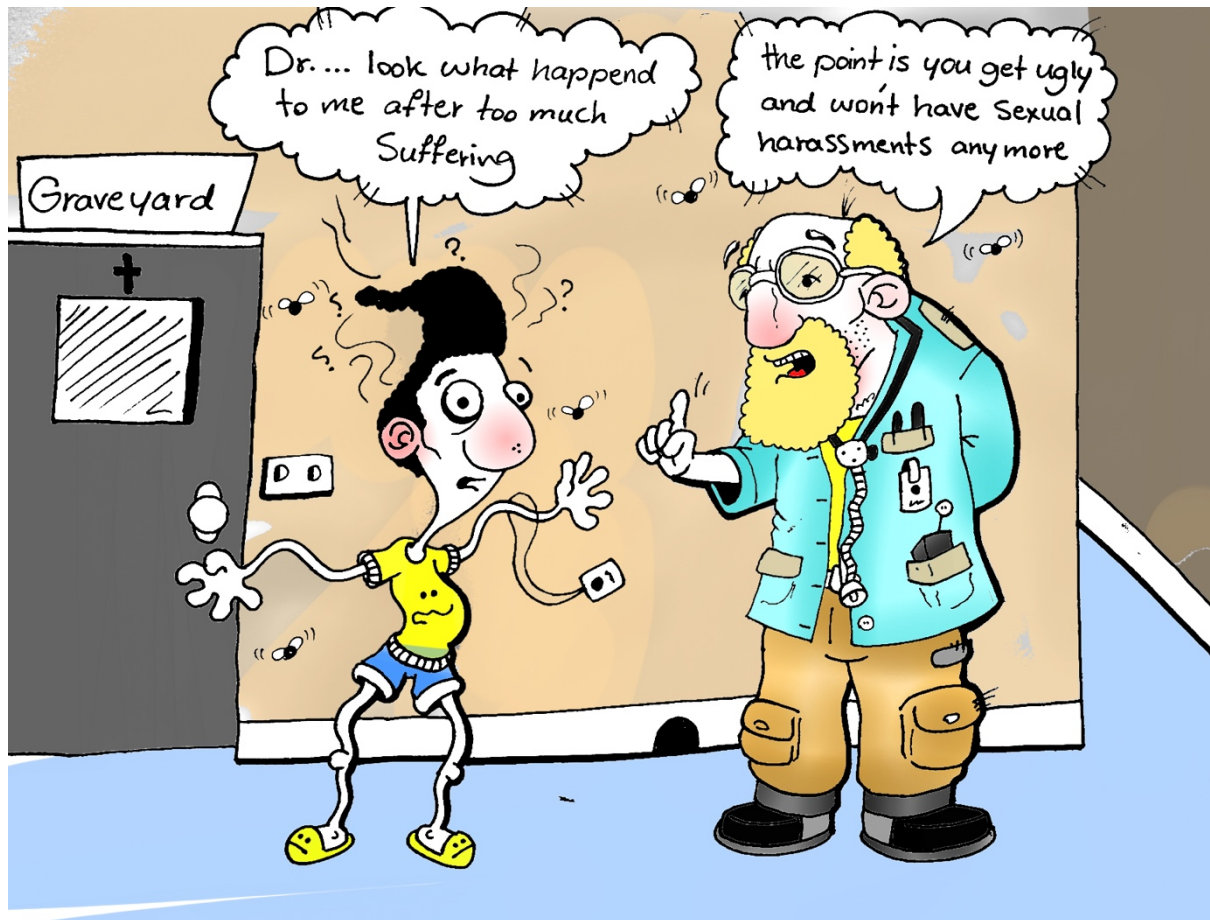
(CRNI) announced that Eaten Fish would be the 2016 recipient of their annual Award for Courage in Editorial Cartooning, prompting media attention from international outlets including *The Washington Post* and *Radio New Zealand*.<sup>11</sup> The CRNI also called on cartoonists to post cartoons in support Eaten Fish on social media, with the aim of putting pressure on the Australian government to release him in time to attend the ceremony in Durham, North Carolina, that September. Ultimately, the award was presented in absentia, with Janet Galbraith appearing via video chat to present remarks on Dorani's behalf. However, the award had the effect of raising Eaten Fish's profile and providing him with a larger media platform. In December, *The Guardian* published a four-page comic by Eaten Fish reporting the death of a Sudanese refugee named Faysal Ishak Ahmed on Manus Island<sup>12</sup>. However, Dorani paid a price for drawing attention to Faysal's death and faced unwanted pressure from the guards at the camps. In retrospect, Dorani recalled that the comic in *The Guardian* "made so much problem for me. This time officers and security with a personal problem, like coming to me face to face. This wasn't even government pressure; it was this time personal." Dorani began a hunger strike "just to stop the pressure", on January 31, 2017, and refused to eat for eighteen days.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cavna, "Australia has detained this"; Davidson, "Refugee artist detained"; Radio New Zealand, "Refugee on Manus recognised".

<sup>12</sup> Eaten Fish, "Happy Bloody Christmas".

<sup>13</sup> Zahl and Dorani, *Sølvyberget* podcast #107: Ali Dorani.



(Figure 3: A cartoon Dorani drew about his 2017 hunger strike. Image copyright Ali Dorani, used by permission.)

In February, as word began to spread about Eaten Fish's hunger strike, his cause was taken up in a variety of ways.<sup>14</sup> Dozens of artists contributed to a zine published by artist and activist Jini Maxwell about Eaten Fish, and the UK-based Professional Cartoonists' Organisation began a social media similar campaign #AddAFish, which asked for participants to show their support of Dorani by posting drawings fish on social media, and initially featured dozens of drawings every day.<sup>15</sup>

During the hunger strike, Dorani told journalist Michael Gordon, "I think you should give me the right to die and stop this torture and suffers and pains. I have no energy left to tell my

<sup>14</sup> CRNI, "Emergency Update: Eaten Fish".

<sup>15</sup> Maxwell, *Dear Eaten Fish*; Bogle, "Cartoonists use #AddAFish".

stories to Australians any more.”<sup>16</sup> Eventually, he reported that had ended the hunger strike after 18 days, because it was leading him to have suicidal thoughts. By February 2017, he became too ill to draw any more, but #AddAFish drawings continued to be posted online in his support,<sup>17</sup> and throughout the rest of the year his work was featured at events and exhibitions in Australia and the UK.<sup>18</sup> Behind the scenes, Galbraith and CRNI were working with The International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) to organise for Dorani to receive an artist’s residency in a city of refuge. In December 2017 this was finalised, and Galbraith accompanied Dorani on a flight to Stavanger, Norway to begin his residency. After five years in dehumanizing detention centres, Dorani reported, “My journey has just started”<sup>19</sup>.

Dorani’s work as Eaten Fish allowed him to rally support from several sectors. Galbraith was able to link him to Australia’s the literary and art worlds through his first exhibition. Marlton’s presence in both the art world and the world of Australian journalism through his position as a staff cartoonist with *The Guardian*, brought Eaten Fish significantly more attention, especially other editorial cartoonists and reporters for *The Guardian*. Members of the Professional Cartoonists’ Organisation with connections to the cultural sector were able to help get Eaten Fish’s work exhibited in museums and libraries in the UK.<sup>20</sup> Crossing all of these communities, was a network of left-wing activists and humanitarians who circulated and widely supported his cause, In addition to these social connections, Eaten Fish’s work was able to travel widely because it crosses the borders of many comics and illustration genres. His drawing practices also transverse the practices used by many of the communities that supported him, from sketching to reportage to activism. Eaten Fish rallied support from

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<sup>16</sup> Gordon, “Slow death on Manus”.

<sup>17</sup> Robertson, “Eaten Fish: Iranian asylum”. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/feb/19/eaten-fish-iranian-asylum-seeker-and-cartoonist-ends-manus-island-hunger-strike>

<sup>18</sup> <https://cartoonistsrights.org/eaten-fish-receives-voltaire-empty-chair-award-liberty-victoria/>

<sup>19</sup> ICORN, “Manus Island Cartoonist”.

<sup>20</sup> <https://procartoonists.org/pcos-gagged-cartoon-exhibition/>;

several sectors, especially the literary and art worlds, where his work was first exhibited in Australia, the world of journalism where he found his most influential supporters in the form of editorial cartoonists, the network of left-wing artist activists who circulated and widely supported his cause, as well as the cultural sector where his work has been exhibited in museums.<sup>21</sup> In the following section I define these practices in the work of Eaten Fish and discuss how they connect to wider practices of political and protest drawing.

## Transnational Drawing Practices

### Indexical Drawing: Lifelines

Although he would later turn to more outward forms of protest with his art, Ali Dorani has said that his first drawings on Manus Island served primarily as ad hoc self-care and therapy, a means of focusing his attention away from his anxiety about germs as he battled Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and other mental illnesses that were exacerbated by detention. Some of his sketches are nearly saturated with nervous cross-hatches, a visualization of his inner state that recalls the way a frenzy of dashes on an electrocardiogram trace might indicate an elevated heart rate. These are indexical drawings in that sense that, as Hillary Chute notes, “marks made on paper by hand are an index of the body in a way that a photograph, “taken” through a lens, is not”<sup>22</sup>.

Drawing can testify to an individual’s presence and their unique mark in the world. This idea is enshrined in certain political practices, such as endorsing with a signature or ticking a

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<sup>21</sup> <https://procartoonists.org/pcos-gagged-cartoon-exhibition/>;

<sup>22</sup> Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 20.

ballot box, as well as in alternative citizenship practices including tagging, graffiti and street art. This kind of mark-making is often non-representational and primarily functions as a marker of a unique individual in a particular place and time. They are *lifelines*, drawn from life and pointing to lived experience; they are “digital in the now neglected etymological sense: handmade, produced with the fingers”<sup>23</sup>. Some prisoners on Manus Island made the embodied nature of drawing doubly apparent by writing on their own hands and publishing photographs of them online. Even though they may have been intended only as a private coping mechanism, these drawings serve as testimonies to individuality in the face of a dehumanizing system.

The largest of Dorani’s drawings reproduced in the First Dog on the Moon strip that introduced Eaten Fish to many Australians was also one of his simplest: a picture of a rat with bulging eyes hovering as if frozen between a plate of cheese and a skirting board mouse hole. Although cartoony, it is barely a cartoon; there is no punchline, and it alludes to no clear meaning. Instead, the drawing is affecting because we know the circumstances of its creation and can therefore read the terror behind the countless pencil scratches that shade rat’s body, nearly rendering it three-dimensional. The picture is not about the rat, but the action of drawing as produced by a human body. Michelle Bui links the act of drawing by political prisoners to other bodily acts of resistance including lip stitching, hunger strikes, physical protests and other ways of using “their bodies to make visible the violence they have been subjected to”, desperate ends that are resorted to when “the only power prisoners could exercise was over their own bodies”<sup>24</sup>. Distributing hand-made images online provides an outlet for bodily protest that does not markedly harm the body, but which still calls attention

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<sup>23</sup> Couser, “Is there a body”, 351.

<sup>24</sup> Bui, “Resistance and visibility”, 187.

to the life that draws the lines. As Stuart Murray notes, drawings “*are* a real trace, these hands, this body ... so if they bear witness, this witness, too, is produced by us, and we must bear witness reflexively to a system of which we ourselves are a part”<sup>25</sup>. In other words, when we acknowledge drawing as the work of an individual, we should also reflect on our own places as individuals within the same system. Readers of cartoons drawn from Manus Island or other Black Sites then become implicated in the systems that that imprison and dehumanize innocent people, and are simultaneously confronted with the humanity that those systems attempt to deny. Per Hatfield, “Art filters into life, alerting us to our own participation in the author’s self-construction”.<sup>26</sup>

In her book *Documentary Comics*, Nina Mickwitz argues that there is a performative aspect to both the production and the reception of documentary comics, and that “the performative aspects of production assume a more visible and central role, thus drawing attention to the subjective aspects of both experience and communication.”<sup>27</sup> Eaten Fish’s sketches demonstrate that this can also be true of non just documentary comics and graphic memoirs, but of drawing more broadly. Considering drawing as a way of making both subjectivities and subjecthood visible helps to link the sketches of marginalized people to the checks marks drawn on ballot boxes —markers of individuality and its place and power within a greater political system. Often insignificant on their own, these drawn markers can become powerful in aggregate.

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<sup>25</sup> Murray, “Rhetorical Insurgents”, 137.

<sup>26</sup> Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 126

<sup>27</sup> Mickwitz, *Documentary Comics*, 27

## Reflexive Drawing: Maps and Reflections

Another political drawing practice involves using drawn images to visualise the self, community, environment and the systems and practices that connect them. This practice is both reflective and reflexive. The image-maker transforms the blank canvas into a sort of subjective mirror that reflects her experience of the world in a way that is not representational in the visual sense as it may seem to be through a lens of a camera, but subjective, filtered through the mind's eye, showing perspectives, connections and images that cannot otherwise be seen. Køhlert argues that because the practice of autobiographical cartooning allows artists to make their subjectivities visible, and “can therefore be enabling for minorities whose subjectivity has been denied in that it offers a method to delineate and embody marginal selves, as well as a multiple perspective through which to resist the dominant interpellation by official society.”<sup>28</sup>

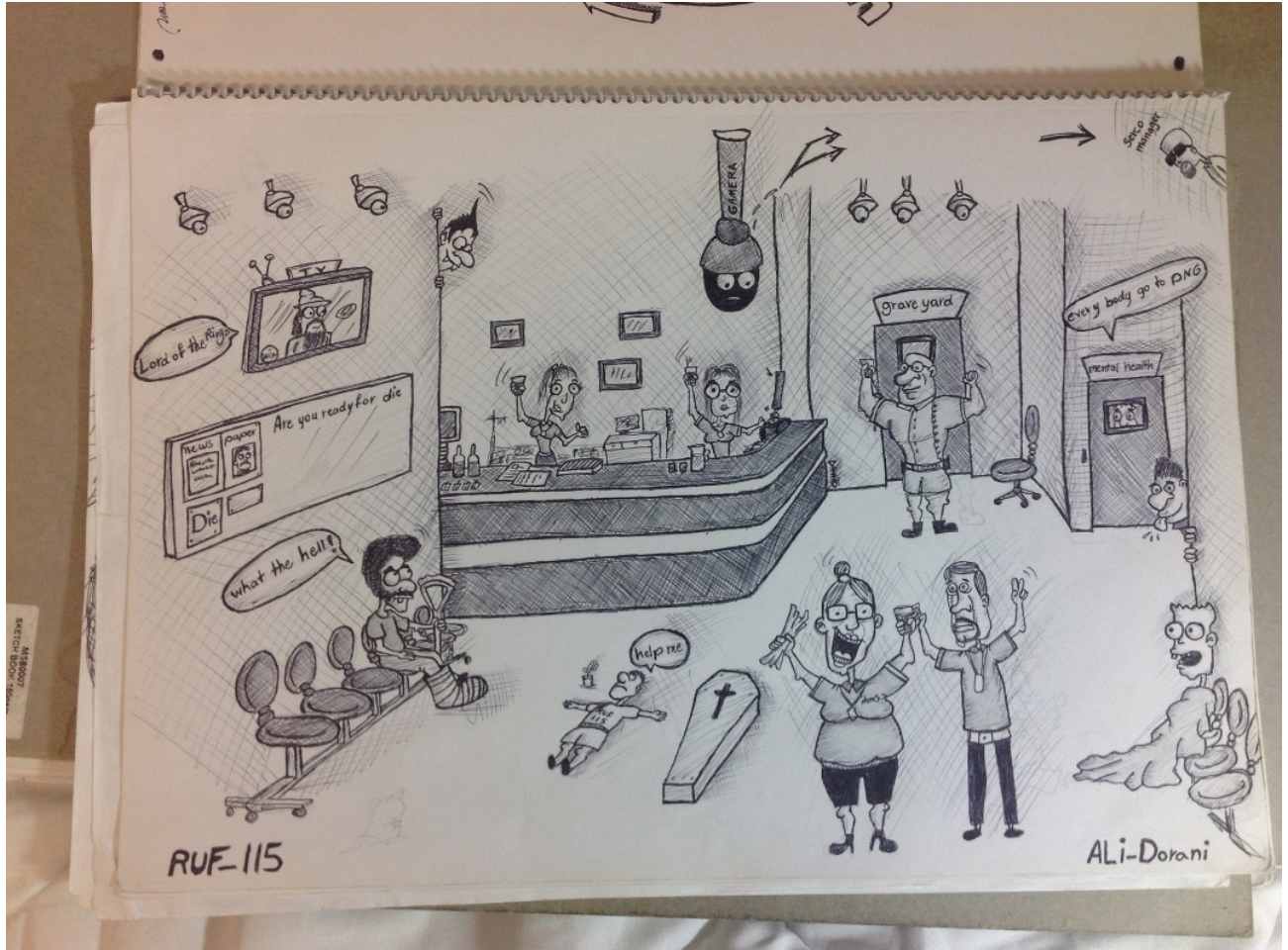
Dorani's work commonly features an autobiographical avatar, Eaten Fish himself, whose appearance varies between drawings but is characterized by his skinny limbs, round, popping eyes, a bulbous nose and a frizzy bulb of hair perched on his forehead. He wears thong sandals, shorts and tee-shirt branded with Dorani's immigration processing number: RUF115. Although Eaten Fish is sometimes a protagonist in Dorani's drawings, he is more often an observer, a practice that calls to mind the work of Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali. An observer character named Handala appeared constantly in Ali's political cartoons from 1969 until the cartoonist's assassination in 1987. Handala was a barefoot refugee child who al-Ali drew facing away from the reader, as if he were standing in front of al-Ali's cartoons, watching and testifying.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Handala, Eaten Fish is an autobiographical avatar for his

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<sup>28</sup> Køhlert, “Working Through It”, 127.

<sup>29</sup> Najjar, “Cartoons as a Site”, 256-257.

author, and Dorani’s work also calls to mind graphic memoirs, such as Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, where the author’s avatar “juxtaposes her own experiences with the larger political scene”, creating both a personal and political reflection.<sup>30</sup>



(Figure 4: Eaten Fish’s sketch of a Manus Island medical centre. Image copyright Ali Dorani, used with permission.)

However, Dorani’s reflexive drawings are particularly interesting because unlike many autobiographical comics and graphic memoirs, they are mostly large, single drawings that are non-narrative and non-sequential. One example is a tableau of a medical centre waiting room, where the doctors and nurses dance around with drinks in their hands, ignoring and outnumbering the patients who huddle beneath a bulletin board that reads “Are you ready for

<sup>30</sup> Davis, “A Graphic Self”, 272.



die”. Outnumbering the staff are CCTV cameras, which in the world of *Eaten Fish* all stare with cartoon eyes, and “expose a brutal irony: the cameras are actually recording video evidence of criminal acts – to no effect.”<sup>31</sup> Dorani draws *Eaten Fish* himself lying on the floor next to a coffin, staring up at a black dome camera. There are no panels, and no movement aside from the motion lines of the revelling medical staff. This is drawing of stasis, a map of a lack of care.

Dorani’s highly subjective and surreal approach to these panoramas of life on Manus Island stand in sharp contrast to more representational depictions of disaster zones, such as Joe Sacco’s two-page spread of Jabalia refugee camp in Palestine, which eschews the “idiosyncratic codes of comics—such as the use of captions, speech bubbles or gutters— (and) may be read as an attempt to moderate the artistic mediation of the genre and thus tame its fictionalizing features”<sup>32</sup>. Instead, Dorani uses a cartoon cartography that is characteristic of wimmelbooks like Martin Hadford’s “Where’s Wally” or Richard Scarry’s *Busy Town* series, “picturebooks which display a series of panoramas teeming with an immense number of characters and details”<sup>33</sup>. These children’s books feature drawn landscapes that are crawling with inter-related details to notice, and Rémi argues that “learning how to handle the demanding abundance of a wimmelpicture therefore implies learning how to cope with a complex world,” and function as models that children use to understand the multiplicity of meanings in the world. Unlike Sacco’s “realistically compelled and dramatic image” of Jabalia, which claims to be “self-explanatory”, Dorani’s drawings of Manus are absurd and idiosyncratic: a skeletal Bart Simpson waits in the medical center, while a spritely vampire peeks around a corner and *The Lord of the Rings* plays on TV.

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<sup>31</sup> Perera and Pugliese, “A Nightmare World”, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Delgado-Garcia, “Invisible Spaces”, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Rémi, “Reading as Playing”, 115.

The comparison with *Busytown* is revealing because Scarry and Dorani use similar graphic techniques to visualise how individuals participate in systems which either enable or frustrate aspects of their humanity and citizenship. “*Busytown*” depicts the citizens of an idyllic 20th century metropolis where people (represented as anthropomorphic animals) work, vote and receive health care and cheerfully participate in any number of “everyday” activities, while Dorani’s wimmel drawings “document the myriad ways in which the inmates of Manus Island are rendered targets, driven to the edges of endurance in hellish surroundings”.<sup>34</sup> The ironic contrast with *Busy Town* is that *Eaten Fish* shows that learning to cope with and understand the systems on Manus is an absurdity. Yet mapping his subjective experience of that absurdity brings it to light, and “bring before our eyes the forms of abjection, criminality and violence that have been fostered through the organization of the camps”.<sup>35</sup>

There is also a reflexive quality in many of the cartoons that were drawn in support of *Eaten Fish* in coordination with Marlton’s launch of the *EatenFish.com* website, which were published in a batch as the site’s first blog post.<sup>36</sup> Most of these cartoonists were Australian, and drew about Australian politics and identity in ways that explored the contradictions in their own subjectivities. Some of the most striking comics depict *Eaten Fish*’s plight in distinctly Australian ways: Jim Pavlidis draws a beachgoer in a pair of Australian flag thong sandals confronting a fish skeleton wrapped in barbed wire that has been washed up on the shore; Katie Moon depicts asylum seekers as the iconic Aussie beach meal of fish and chips wrapped in brown paper, being picked apart by vicious seagulls. The cartoonist Badiucio designed a version of the Australian Made logo which replaces the kangaroo with a fish skeleton; Sam Wallman shows the continent of Australia itself on the brink of gobbling up a

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<sup>34</sup> Perera and Pugliese, “A Nightmare World”, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Perera and Pugliese, “A Nightmare World”, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Marlton, “Cartoons in support”.

hapless fish. As well as rhetorical arguments, these are reflexive maps drawn by Australian cartoonists reflecting on Manus Island, maps which make visible the ways Australian identity is predicated on the exclusion of refugees like Eaten Fish.

Two of the comics probe this relationship more deeply by showing the cartoonists reflecting on what it means to draw a cartoon about someone in detention, and can additionally be classified as meta-drawings. Andrew Weldon and Chris Downes show their autobiographical avatars drawing and contemplating the fate of Eaten Fish, who is shown to be simultaneously be drawing from a place of distress. These cartoons, which almost entirely conflate the practices of reflexive drawing and advocacy, can be considered “meta-comics”, which Thomas Inge argues have been common in newspaper comics, for example when cartoonists would often draw “cross-over” strips featuring characters from strips by other cartoonists.<sup>37</sup> Marlton and the other Australian cartoonists drawing Eaten Fish’s avatar alongside their own autobiographical avatars are continuing this tradition, with the added twist that their “characters” are based on real people. Calvin Cahill defines his practice of meta-drawing as “an attempt to register the affective relationship between my body, my consciousness and ... a given object”.<sup>38</sup> Here, Weldon and Downes chart their relationship between their own bodies and consciousness as citizens and Eaten Fish as a cartoonist who is being denied citizenship, explicitly drawing attention to creative and cultural citizenship as networks of rights and obligations which are unequally distributed.

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<sup>37</sup> Inge, “Form and Function in Metacomics”, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Cahill, “Finnegans Wake: Reading through”, 5.



(Figure 5: Chris Downes' cartoon in support of Eaten Fish. Image copyright Chris Downes, used with permission.)



(Figure 6: Andrew Weldon's cartoon in support of Eaten Fish. Image copyright Andrew Weldon, used with permission.)

### Drawing as Reportage: Cartoon Advocacy

If reflexive drawing is about picturing first-person experiences of the author, drawing as reportage is about using those tools in the service of another person or situation, which may

involve adopting a third-person perspective. Historical examples include courtroom sketch artists, and the documentary artists who drew images of the American Civil War for *Harpers Weekly*. More recent works of reportage include the works of Joe Sacco, Sarah Glidden and a growing number of graphic reporters who are covering the ongoing refugee crisis.<sup>39</sup> Graphic reporters use their drawings to depict the stories of others, as in Kugler's *Escaping Wars and Waves* which is based on several years of interviews with Syrian refugees, and "brings the reader right up to the people Kugler meets, feeling present as he records their conversations, with his layered drawings capturing the gestures and movements of his subjects along with their surroundings".<sup>40</sup> The two perspectives may be intermingled, but one of the features of drawings is that they tend to implicate the image-maker's role in depicting the story, which is often made invisible in textual third-person reportage or biography.

According to Perera and Pugliese, Dorani's drawings serve a courageous role "as a means to bring to public attention the daily crimes that transpire in Manus camp".<sup>41</sup> This kind of graphic reportage from the very center of a crisis is extraordinary. It is more common to see cartoonists advocating on the behalf of a crisis happening at some distance, as in the case of Marlton's *First Dog on the Moon* comic about *Eaten Fish*. Marlton drew from his own perspective, but also reproduced several of *Eaten Fish* drawings directly within the panels of the *Guardian* comic, including one of Dorani's avatar, and featured direct quotes from their online chats, putting Dorani in the center of *First Dog on the Moon*'s influential cultural platform.

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<sup>39</sup> Crabapple, "Where Can They"

<sup>40</sup> Brazell, "Escaping Wars and Waves"

<sup>41</sup> Perera and Pugliese, "A Nightmare World", 4.



(Figure 7: The final page of Eaten Fish's comic about Faysal, originally published in *The Guardian*. Image copyright Ali Dorani, used with permission.)

As Marlton and others served to raise Eaten Fish's profile, Dorani then had a platform to shine a light on further injustices on Manus Island. In late December 2016, Dorani published a comic in *The Guardian* which was primarily an act of advocacy, recounting the story of another Manus prisoner who died during detention.<sup>42</sup> Using his autobiographical narrator, he describes how he witnessed the death of a Sudanese refugee named Faysal Ishak Ahmed on Manus Island. Faysal, who was 27 years old, had been sick for months, and his fellow detainees felt that he had been denied adequate medical care; in the week before he died more than 60 detainees signed a letter of complaint about his lack of treatment, and protested his death by "peacefully taking control of two of the four internal compounds in the detention centre".<sup>43</sup> Dorani's comic can be seen as contributing to this protest, an act of civic responsibility to memorialize a member of his community and raising awareness of his mistreatment. Many of the details of *Happy Bloody Christmas*, Dorani's graphic narrative about Faysal, would have been difficult to comprehend for readers of *The Guardian*. It uses jargon of the detention centers, abbreviations for organizations that operate on Manus and other references that do not seem to be immediately clear, while Dorani's English grammar is idiosyncratic. As a gestalt mesh of images and text, it conveys the trauma, disorientation and stifling bureaucracy of life and death on Manus Island in a way that might be missing from a more polished piece of work. However, if this had been a text piece, it's unlikely that *The Guardian* would have published it, and certainly would not have let it run unedited as the comic did. However, the cultural capital that had been granted to Eaten Fish through the advocacy work of other cartoonists provided a platform. His Eaten Fish avatar allowed Dorani a voice in a major news publication he may not have otherwise had access to.

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<sup>42</sup> Eaten Fish, "Happy Bloody Christmas".

<sup>43</sup> Doherty and Hunt, "Manus Island detainees".



While most of his comics published while he was in detention are either meditations on the unbearable stasis on Manus Island, or broadly political cartoons, Dorani's comic about Faysal is one of his only 'graphic narratives'. However, it only fleetingly resembles a comic or graphic novel. Much of the narrative in the comic is conveyed through typeset text that conveys Dorani's account of Faysal's illness and death. The only narrative sequence is three panels where Dorani is using the toilet, hears Faysal screaming, and nervously emerges to see what has happened. In the final page, Eaten Fish is shown pointing to photographs of the locations where he had seen Faisal, almost like a television anchor might when showing viewers the scene of a crime. He uses his panels as windows to make the horror he has witnessed visible. These colour photographs contrast sharply with the cartoonish, dreamlike quality of Dorani's black and white drawings. His deeply personal written account implicates Dorani as a witness, but the photographs give us a sense that he does not believe the enormity of the tragedy can be understood through the eyes of Eaten Fish or the subjectivity of his drawings. His greatest tool in this case was in fact his avatar itself, as a visible figure within the Australian mediascape, whose mere presence at the scene in this case made his reportage newsworthy.

### Rhetorical Drawing: Iconic Abduction and Graphic Persuasion

Another practice that Eaten Fish employed on Manus Island is what Medhurst and Desousa dub "graphic persuasion".<sup>44</sup> This practice is perhaps most popularly exemplified in editorial cartoons, where "cartoonists direct the audience's attention by the addition, omission,

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<sup>44</sup> Medhurst and Desousa, "Political cartoons as rhetorical".

substitution, and/or distortion of visual elements”, in order to make an argument about political issues or identities.<sup>45</sup> Editorial cartoons have played pivotal roles in encapsulating national identities, as in the case of the “Join, or Die” severed snake drawn by Benjamin Franklin which helped inspired unity in the American colonies during the French and Indian War, or the political iconography initially popularised by Thomas Nast in *Harper’s Weekly*, including the Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey.<sup>46</sup> While political cartoons are frequently taken for granted in the West, and studied considerably less than comic books and graphic novels, the 1989 assassination of al-Ali, the 2005 *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy and the related 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shooting “suggest that (political) cartoons are taken very seriously in the Arab and Muslim worlds”.<sup>47</sup>

Eaten Fish’s “graphic persuasion” drawings abide by some of the genre conventions of political cartoons, and share an iconic directness with other forms of political communication. For example, his drawings of babies in freedom and detention are pictured thinking about icons that resemble emoji, and the fishing boat in his before and after cartoon can be read as a riposte to the Australian government’s use of the fishing boat as a dehumanized symbol for asylum seekers.<sup>48</sup> Eaten Fish’s cartoons in this genre are strikingly different from his other drawings in that can be read quickly and communicate simply. Medhurst and Desousa argue “the basic form of rhetorical disposition or arrangement employed by the editorial cartoonist is *contrast*”,<sup>49</sup> and while Dorani shows a stark, almost simplistic contrast between freedom and detention, he also uses the simple, childlike style to contrast with the deathly serious realities of Manus Island.

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<sup>45</sup> Edwards and Winkler, “Representative form and the”, 305.

<sup>46</sup> Spiegelman, “Drawing Blood, ; Rodibaugh, “When Donkey and Elephant”,

<sup>47</sup> Najjar, “Cartoons as a Site”, 264.

<sup>48</sup> Davidson, “I stopped these”.

<sup>49</sup> Medhurst and Desousa, “Political cartoons as rhetorical”, 205.

Many of the cartoonists who drew images in support of Eaten Fish turned either his name or his avatar into a symbol, and frequently conflated his visual alter-ego and textual nom-de-plume by depicting him as a hybrid of man and fish. Even those cartoons that did not feature the Eaten Fish character leaned heavily on fish imagery for visual symbolism – fish trapped in bowls or bags, fish being eaten by other sea creatures, fish being eaten by politicians, fish dreaming of freedom, fish bound and hooded.<sup>50</sup> This can be understood as a shift in practice from advocacy and reportage, into more rhetorical, editorial-style cartooning. The shift became more pronounced as international cartoonists began to pick up the story of Eaten Fish from the news and social media. For many cartoonists outside of Australia, Eaten Fish’s plight was constructed almost exclusively as a foreign issue, with the Australian government portrayed as a villain. For example, a cartoon by @jsutliff features a bloodthirsty koala devouring a fish, while an American Eagle and a British Lion look on from a distance bemused. The eagle expresses surprise that the koala isn’t “all cute and cuddly”, and the cartoon’s caption asks “Horrible refugee prisons in Australia? Would Crocodile Dundee be okay with this?”<sup>51</sup> This is an example of a purely rhetorical cartoon, which views the issue from an American vantage point and translates it into visual and pop cultural symbols. In this comic, Eaten Fish becomes a symbol of “otherness”, without a hint of self-reflexivity.

## Conclusion

The four types of practices detailed above can be thought of as a rough continuum which moves from inwardly-focused drawing, which is purely indexical and has no intended

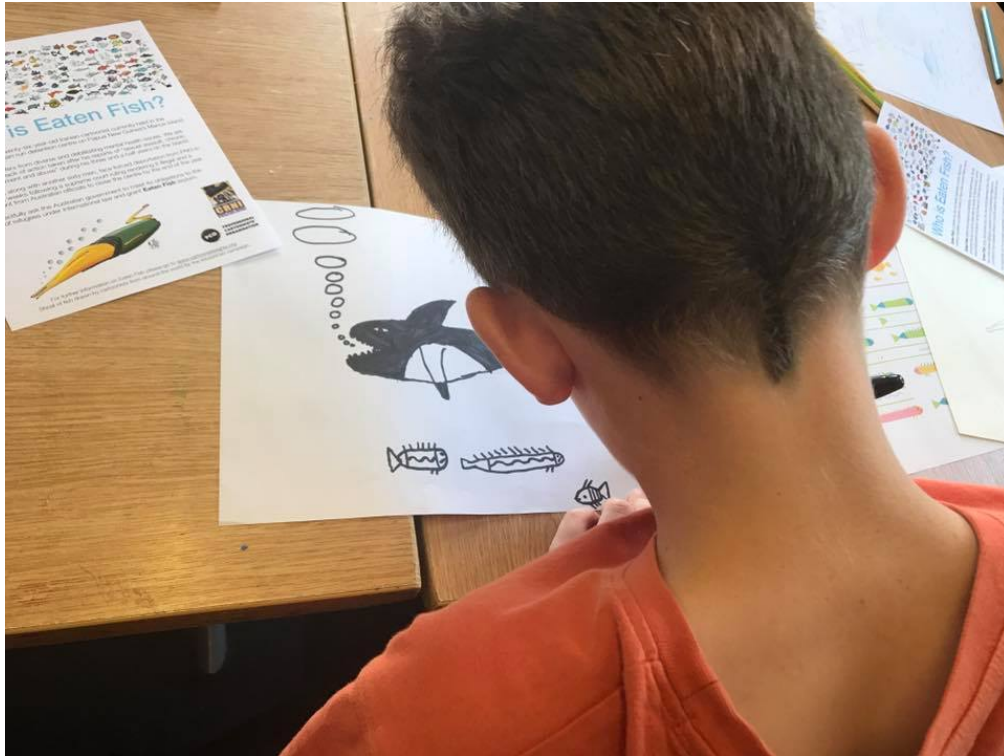
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<sup>50</sup> Perera, “Penal sites, teletechnics”.

<sup>51</sup> @jsutliff, “Horrible Refugee Prisons”.

meaning outside of its connection to its author, to outwardly focused political images which are intended to be read entirely symbolically without connection to their source. An example might be Dorani's self-care sketches on the indexical end of the spectrum and blood thirsty koala on the rhetorical end. That said, these practices are not exclusive of each other.

During the final year of Dorani's detention, drawings by and in support of Eaten Fish also appeared in several exhibitions in the United Kingdom, including the Shewsbury International Cartoon Festival in April, the Herne Bay Cartoon Festival in August, the Westminster Reference Library in November, bringing Eaten Fish's work into a different context. In a workshop at Herne Bay, for example, children learned about Dorani and were given the opportunity to draw fish in support of his cause. Unlike the stolen sheet of paper and single pen that Dorani had to work with when he began drawing on Manus Island, photos of the workshop show that the students had plenty of art supplies and coloured markers to choose from. These drawings combined indexical drawing with rhetorical drawing. The indexical function of the children's art was to demonstrate their existence as young people aware of Eaten Fish's plight, while the persistent use of the fish functioned as a rhetorical symbol of refugees in general.



(Figure 8: A young participant at the Herne Bay Cartoon Festival #DrawAFish workshop inspired by *Eaten Fish*. Photo copyright @aroom4myfriend, used with permission.)

At the point that the story of *Eaten Fish* reached the cartoon festivals and libraries, it had ceased to be entirely focused on supporting Dorani and vouching for his freedom. *Eaten Fish* had become a cultural product, a tool for discussing asylum and detention, even as the cartoonist himself still languished on Manus Island. Through the networks of Graphic Citizenship, cartoons had worked as “soft weapons”, to use Gillian Whitlock’s term, that offer engaged interventions, often disrupting master, mainstream narratives and traumatic events associated with immigration”.<sup>52</sup> The cultural and creative value *Eaten Fish* offered other image-makers and image-viewers to see their own citizenship from a different perspective was ultimately enough to build a case for his freedom from Manus Island, although it required his own extraordinary artistic achievement, the advocacy of several networks of artists and activists, as well as nearly five years spent in detention. As of this

<sup>52</sup> Douglas, “Ayen’s Cooking School for”, 243; Whitlock, “Autographics: The seeing ‘I’”,

writing, Ali Dorani is living safely in Norway, where he continues his work as an artist and activist, and the Manus Island detention centre has been closed, with most of the detainees transferred to the PNG capital of Port Moresby in late 2019, where many of them remain “in limbo”.<sup>53</sup> Dorani recently wrote, “I always say that art saved me – it helped the Norwegian government find out about my situation”<sup>54</sup> and his art has helped to bring to light the abuses in Australia’s asylum seeker policy. It goes without saying that it should not be conditional upon refugees to become acclaimed artists in order to become visible and given safe harbour. The burden that was required of Eaten Fish before he was granted the political, civil and social rights through his residency in Norway was extraordinary. The case of Ali Dorani, like that of other refugee artists, and indeed of refugees in general, has been extremely precarious as his rights, identity, wellbeing and relationships were under constant threat on Manus Island.

Eaten Fish’s ability to make his plight visible through drawing practices that were shared and understood across several communities of practice in Australia eventually connected him to a large network of people who deployed drawing practices to draw attention to the injustice he was experiencing alongside other refugees. The children who participated in the workshops at the Westminster Reference Library had an opportunity to engage with the story of Eaten Fish in an imaginative, perhaps playful way, even as Eaten Fish himself was still suffering in detention. This demonstrates the power of transnational drawing practices to reach beyond borders and create conversations across communities, while also highlighting the need to draw attention to the subjectivities of people who are threatened by dehumanising regimes, borders and black sites.

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<sup>53</sup> Baker, “Manus Island has shut”; Whiting, “Manus Island refugee processing”.

<sup>54</sup> Cheng and Dorani, “Iranian cartoonist”

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