Visual Intervention:

The Depiction of Refugees in Fictional and Nonfiction Comics

Martin Breul

Department of English

McGill University, Montréal

February 2022

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree

Master of Arts

Contents

Abstract

Persistent refugee migration, especially over the past decade, has resulted in an increase of xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric in public discourse across the global West. This project explores how such hostile sentiment is countered and responded to in a set of exemplary graphic novels depicting refugee and migrant experiences. Each of the examined works employs distinct aesthetic and formal strategies of representation to access and explore the complex realities of displacement through narrative. The close-reading of these strategies reveals the integral role of fictionalization for the depiction of refugees in both fictional and nonfictional texts. The first chapter focuses on *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* by Kate Evans, chapter two interrogates *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq* by Sarah Glidden, both works of nonfiction. The final chapter offers readings of Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and *Home* by Julio Anta and Anna Wieszczyk, two fictional texts. This research shows the contribution of a variety of documentary as well as fictional refugee comics to the cultural resistance against growing anti-refugee sentiment, and how works of graphic literature on the topic assert the humanity of forced migrants.

Abstrait

La migration constante des réfugiés, particulièrement au cours de la dernière décennie, a eu pour conséquence une augmentation des rhétoriques xénophobes et anti-immigration dans le discours public en Occident. Ce projet explore les différentes réponses à ce sentiment hostile à travers une série de romans graphiques abordant les expériences vécues par les réfugiés. Chacune des oeuvres examinées fait usage d'une esthétique et d'une stratégie de représentation distinctes afin d'explorer les réalités complexes de la migration au moyen de la narration. L'étude attentive de ces stratégies révèle le rôle intégral de la fictionnalisation dans la représentation des réfugiés dans les textes, qu'ils soient fictionnels ou non. Le premier chapitre est consacré à *Threads : From the Refugee Crisis* de Kate Evans, tandis que le deuxième chapitre s'intéresse à *Rolling Blackouts : Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq de Sarah Glidden,* deux œuvres non-fictionnelles. Le dernier chapitre, quant à lui, présente des extraits de *The Arrival* de Shaun Tan et *Home* de Julio Anta et Anna Wieszczyk, deux textes de fiction. Cette recherche démontre la contribution d'une variété d'oeuvres graphiques documentaires et fictives au mouvement de résistance culturelle qui s'oppose au sentiment anti-réfugié croissant, de même que l'impact que peuvent avoir les œuvres de littérature graphique sur l'humanisation des réfugiés.

Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude belongs to Professor Sean Carney for his kind and engaging supervision. This project could not have grown from a vague idea into an essay of this dimension without his scholarly input, astute corrections, imaginative suggestions, as well as his moral support during the stressful phases of the work. Thank you for sacrificing so many hours of your sabbatical to discuss comics with me!

Once more, Trudy Michaela Lynn has spent much time and energy to iron out my prose and turn this thesis into a readable piece of writing. As always, thank you for your invaluable effort, your editing, and your encouraging feedback.

On the last metres, Thomas Mihelich-Morissette has allowed me to recruit him for some final proofreading. Thank you for your enthusiasm about my work.

The initial seeds of this project were planted in January 2019 at the University of Glasgow, when I attended an open research seminar on the topic of refugee comics by comics scholar and Canadianist Candida Rifkind. This topic combined my scholarly interest on graphic literature dealing with war trauma with my curiosity and disappointment about the frightening reactions of the public in my native East Germany to the 2015 influx of Syrian refugees. Since that event, more kind souls and brilliant minds than I could ever fit onto a single page have contributed in major and minor ways to the assembly of this thesis. Thank you all, you know who you are.

Finally, I want to thank my partner Martina Genovese for keeping alive dreams throughout the course of this project. You are an inspiration and a true artist. Your companionship means everything. Thank you!

1. Introduction

Anti-Immigration Sentiment and Refugee Comics as Form of Resistance

Weekly demonstrations of the anti-immigrant protest movement PEGIDA have shaken up the city of Dresden in East Germany since October 2014.[1] Still today, citizens assemble every Monday to voice their concerns about Muslim immigration. At one such gathering on June 25, 2018 Siegfried Däbritz, vice-president of the organizing association, took to the stage to speak about the German rescue ship *Lifeline* in the Mediterranean. The boat had recently been barred from docking in Italy and Malta to unload 234 people rescued off the coast of Libya.[2] As soon as he referenced the incident, the crowd began to chant "Let them drown! Let them drown!" (my translation).[3] This instance of a public outcry to let helpless arrivals and their saviours perish at sea is one particularly terrifying example of the hostile rhetoric against immigration that has usurped European public discourse over the last decade.[4] A similar shift in tone has simultaneously occurred in the United States. During his presidential bid Donald Trump famously denounced Mexicans for "bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists,"

[1] The German acronym PEGIDA stands for "Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident." For detailed explorations of the movement's history, demography, and its racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and neo-nationalist nature see Thomas Heitz, *Kritische Politische Bildung. Herausforderungen in Der Auseinandersetzung Mit Pegida Und Neo-Rassismus* (Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag, 2017), chap. 3, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=5150541; and Hans Vorländer, Maik Herold, and Schäller Steven, *Pegida and New Right-Wing Populism in Germany*, New Perspectives in German Political Studies (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67495-7.

[2] Thomas Etzler and Sheena McKenzie, "Almost 350 migrants are stranded on two boats in the Mediterranean," CNN, June 24, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/24/europe/maersk-lifeline-migrants-stranded-mediterranean-intl/index.html.

[3] The entire incident is accessible on YouTube, "Dresden 25.6.2018 AFD Pegida schreit "absaufen"," filmed June 25, 2018 at the Neumarkt, Dresden, Germany, video, 0:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yHeYiFEaHM.

[4] According to Peter Filzmaier, the domination of the migration topic in public discourse since 2015 "is not a subjective impression in politics or the media but empirically verifiable from the viewpoint of social science." For his numerical evidence, see Peter Filzmaier, "Preface – Migration and Public Opinion," in *The Migrant Crisis: European Perspectives and National Discourses*, eds. Ulrike Klinger, Markus Rhomberg, Uta Rußmann, trans. Sebastian Niemetz (Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2017), 7.

and he repeatedly threatened to build a wall along the Southern border.[5] After his election, this resentment immediately resulted in political action. After only a week in office, Trump suspended admissions of refugees to the US for 120 days, and the entry of refugees from Syria indefinitely.[6] This thesis examines how such demonization and condemnation of refugees in public discourse and policy is countered through the depiction of migrants in the medium of comics.[7]

By exploring how the empathetic representation of refugees in a set of exemplary works is enhanced by the comics form, I argue that graphic narration is a potent tool to assert the humanity of migrant characters. A growing body of scholarly work is centred on the potency of comics to depict traumatic experiences, often related to war.[8] This project engages the specific subgenre of "refugee comics" to make a similar argument pertaining to the representational strategies that are used in graphic literature to tell stories about displaced people. My focus is on journalistic and artistic renderings of refugees in works written and first published in the global West, and how they respond to misrepresentations of migrants that circulate in the same public. I ask how comics inserts itself into the public and political debate surrounding the refugee crisis, which has produced a considerable backlash against humanitarian effort and policy, for example in the form of the rise of right-wing populism. The works selected for close-reading in

---

[5] Quoted in Katie Reilly, "Here Are All the Times Donald Trump Insulted Mexico," *TIME*, August 31, 2016, https://time.com/4473972/donald-trump-mexico-meeting-insult/.

[6] "Executive Order 13769 of January 27, 2017, Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States," Federal Register 28, no. 20 (2017): 8977-8982, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2017-02-01/pdf/2017-02281.pdf.

[7] As is customary in contemporary comics scholarship, I will keep referring to the medium by using the pluralized noun in conjunction with verb forms in singular. For the purpose of this thesis, I will use the terms graphic narrative, graphic literature, and comics interchangeably to refer to verbal-visual narrative forms, usually incorporating drawn images.

[8] See, for example, Christophe Dony and Caroline Van Linthout, "Comics, Trauma and Cultural Memory(ies) of 9/11," in *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*, eds. Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest, (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010); Hillary Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); and Harriet Earle, *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019), https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60626.

subsequent chapters are *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* by Kate Evans, *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches From Turkey, Syria, and Iraq* by Sarah Glidden, the short series *Home* by Julio Anta and Anna Wieszczyk, and *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan.[9] My key questions are: How are refugees constructed and, given the countless misleading images of survival migrants spreading in recent years, reconstructed as complex individuals worthy of empathy and support? How do these works participate in an act of cultural resistance against the surge of populist anti-immigration narratives and policies that spread across the global West, especially over the last decade? How is such resistance rooted in form, style, and genre? The act of drawing invokes a tension between artistic representation and the accuracy demanded of images conveying documentary truths. This tension also opens questions of fictional versus nonfictional narration. I will address in detail how the selected works of Evans, Glidden, Anta/Wieszczyk, and Tan negotiate and respond to this challenge.

The term refugee itself is subject to perpetual legal, political, academic, and socio-cultural debate. The next section outlines a clear working definition for the purpose of this project. The following part describes the reductive narrative mechanisms integral to anti-refugee sentiment, and alludes to the inherent potential of comics to resist such attitudes. I then position the contemporary graphic narration of refugees within a minor tradition of its own by outlining a short range of historical examples concerned with the subject. The final introductory section then

[9] It is important to note that none of my primary texts has been written by displaced artists and authors, yet refugees have also produced comics narrating their dramatic migration experiences themselves. Some prominent examples of such works are: Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir* (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2017); Leila Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Just World Books, 2015); Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007). For further examples with a varying degree of artistic involvement by refugees, see also Nina Mickwitz, "Comics Telling Refugee Stories," in *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage*, eds. Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); and Candida Rifkind, "Spotlight on Migrant & Refugee Comics," *Extra Inks*, July 8, 2018, https://extra-inks.comicssociety.org/2018/07/08/spotlight-on-migrant-and-refugee-comics/.

develops a theoretical framework for the engagement of my primary readings, laying out how I aim to explore issues of genre and fictionality via a subject-specific inquiry into refugee comics.

Refugees and Survival Migration

A frequent charge against refugees arriving to a developed country is that they are not actually in danger of persecution. Rather, they are accused of seeking to improve their living standards specifically via the local welfare states.[10] Underlying this indictment is a set of contradictory notions. On the one hand, refugees are often stigmatized as poor and uneducated, hence unable to ever contribute to their host society.[11] On the other hand, they are at times accused of not being poor enough and therefore not really in need of international assistance and welfare.[12] Both these claims miss the criteria guiding the current regime of international refugee law, in which neither factors of wealth nor education appear to limit one's eligibility to be recognized as refugee. William Maley pushes back against the undifferentiated criticisms above, pointing out that "it should be taken for granted that people in general want better lives, and refugees who voice such a hope should not be spurned on that basis."[13] Yet these prejudices and their incongruence with legal definitions highlight that no universal concept of refugeehood can be presumed, and that the question of who deserves international support on what grounds remains fiercely contested.

[10] There are numerous articulations of this accusation in the global West over the last decade. For instances from Australia, Denmark, and France, see Sasha Polakow-Suransky, *Go Back to Where You Came From: The Backlash Against Immigration and the Fate of Western Democracy* (New York: Nation Books, 2017), 97-100, 135; for a German example see the PEGIDA speech of German right wing writer and publisher Götz Kubitschek on YouTube, "PEGIDA - Rede von Götz Kubitschek am 5. Oktober 2015 in Dresden," filmed October 5, 2015 in Dresden, Germany, video, 0:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1F67fDCbUY.
[11] William Maley, *What Is a Refugee?* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 8.
[12] Polakow-Suransky, *Go Back*, 100.
[13] Maley, *What Is a Refugee?*, 11.

The most widely applied definition of the refugee is provided by the UN *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* instigated in 1951.[14] This impactful document does not provide an apt concept of the refugee for my investigation, since it responds insufficiently to the diverse realities of international displacement. For one, the original text states that legitimate claims of refugee status must come "[a]s a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951."[15] Although this shortcoming has been corrected with an additional protocol in 1967, it shows that the international community after WWII saw the task of dealing with international mass displacement as finite.[16] However, large-scale refugee movements as historical events long predate German fascism and have not ceased after the end of WWII. Emma Haddad, for example, argues that refugees are a logical effect of the system of nation-states, synchronizing the historical emergence of the refugee with the arrival of the modern political order.[17] In a similar vein, Michael Marrus theorizes refugees as a systemic consequence of modernity itself.[18] Maley provides a brief historical overview of migration and displacement ranging back to the sixteenth century. [19] In her typology of movement, Jaqueline Bhabha identifies a "migration of desperation" which has an even longer history.[20] Hence, an effective definition of refugeehood necessitates permanent validity, and institutional responses risk inadequacy if they are not adaptable to the ever-changing circumstances of persistent refugee movements.

[14] Andrew E. Shacknove, "Who Is a Refugee?," *Ethics* 95, no. 2 (1985): 275.
[15] UNHCR, *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2010), 14, https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.
[16] The same originally applied to the entire office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, see Maley, *What Is a Refugee?*, 18.
[17] Emma Haddad, "The Refugee: Forging National Identities," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 2, no. 2 (2002): 23.
[18] Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3-9.
[19] Maley, *What Is a Refugee?*, 43-74.
[20] Jaqueline Bhabha, *Can We Solve the Migration Crisis?* (Medford: Polity Press, 2018), 6-7.

Article 1C of the *Convention* reveals a second problem related to the projected time-scale of forced migration, namely the so-called "cessation clause" which specifies that refugee status can be revoked if the causes of displacement have supposedly disappeared.[21] Here, international law guided by the *Convention* aligns with much public perception of refugees in the EU. The support of refugee populations is usually deemed to be temporary, which reflects in policies of segregation, isolation, and outright exclusion from civil society.[22] This prescriptive and limited understanding of refugee mobility deprives displaced people of the agency to decide against a return to origin states that have either been destroyed or failed to protect and sustain them in the past. When refugees seek the chance of settling permanently in a safer country, mechanisms of asylum policy often turn out to be instruments of rejection, rather than means of support.[23]

The most salient criticism of the *Convention* is that it only recognizes a narrow set of displacement causes.[24] According to the 1951 text, claims to refugee status are legitimate if a migrant "is being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."[25] Maley critiques the provided list of specific reasons for persecution, because it can never be sufficiently comprehensive. Gender and sexual preference, for instance, are absent from the list. Furthermore, he argues that the concept of persecution itself is not satisfactorily explained. This allows for the exclusion of any discriminatory practice from

[21] UNHCR, *Convention*, 15-16. The term "cessation clause" is used in Maley, *What Is a Refugee?*, 24.
[22] Elena Fontanari, *Lives in Transit: An Ethnographic Study of Refugees' Subjectivity Across European Borders*, Taylor Francis, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), 24, https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.4324/9781351234061.
[23] The misperception of refugees as temporary guests and the consequential legal exclusion is similar to the fate of the many guest workers who entered European countries after WWII, often admitted as a short-term solution to the economic challenges of the post-war boom. Once they were no longer deemed useful, the workers usually stayed, seeking a better future for themselves and their children than their countries of origin could guarantee. See Stephen Castles, *Ethnicity and Globalization* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), 2, ProQuest Ebook Central. For a brief historical survey of the Netherlands, Germany, Britain, and France on the issue, see Polakow-Suransky, *Go Back*, 19-21.
[24] Andrew E. Shacknove, "Who Is a Refugee?," 276-79; Maley, *What Is a Refugee?*, 21.
[25] UNHCR, *Convention*, 14.

the umbrella of persecution by legal authorities deciding to grant or refuse asylum.[26] The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) itself published a background paper on this problem in 2010, admitting that the framework provided by the 1951 *Convention* excludes migration caused by factors such as "population growth, urbanization, governance failures, food and energy insecurity, water scarcity, natural disasters, climate change and the impact of the international economic crisis and recession."[27] This array of criticisms shows that a departure from the UN definition is necessary to refer to the displaced people depicted in the works of graphic literature engaged in this thesis.

A more inclusive conception of the refugee has been developed by Alexander Betts in his study *Survival Migration*. Betts suggests that once a fundamental set of human rights is not assured in their country of origin, a migrant should be entitled to the assistance and protection of the international community.[28] This focus on a general prerogative reverberates with Judith Butler's concept of a universally shared human condition of precariousness, which manifests through a range of essential needs such as "shelter, work, food, medical care, and legal status."[29] The loss of stable provision to these needs can then be recognized as a lack of human rights security. This shift addresses deprivation, a major driving force of displacement ignored by the *Convention*. A person deprived of food thus qualifies for support purely on basis of their unfulfilled essential need, without any obligation to prove specific political causes of said food

[26] Maley, *What Is a Refugee?*, 21-22.
[27] UNHCR, "2010 High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges: Background Paper: Protection Gaps and Responses (Rev.1)," unhcr.org, last modified November 30, 2010, https://www.unhcr.org/protection/hcdialogue%20/4cebeeee9/2010-high-commissioners-dialogue-protection-challenges-background-paper.html.
[28] Alexander Betts, *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 19, https://doi.org/10.1353/book.43593.
[29] Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London: Verso, 2016), 13. An important parallel between Butler's precariousness and basic human rights in Betts is that they are universal conditions applying to everyone, yet both only become visible once a population is endangered, as is the case for survival migrants.

scarcity. Furthermore, any number of simultaneous or interrelated factors might lead to displacement, and Betts' notion also accounts effectively for the complexity of migration causes. Such a definition of the refugee destabilizes the binary of persecution (legitimate) versus deprivation (illegitimate) as reasons for migration that often dominates populist narratives. Deploying the idea of survival migration, I will use the terms survival migrant and refugee interchangeably throughout my argument to refer to people displaced by a lack of human rights security.

The Hatred of Migrants and Narrative Framing

In her critical study of hatred against foreigners, Oksana Yakushko states that in recent years "xenophobia has become a visible and often central socio-cultural ideology that promotes the image of immigrants as dangerous parasitic intruders and immigration as a destructive tidal wave."[30] In the following, I outline the narrative anchoring of such sentiment and its reductive vision. The aim of this section is to establish an understanding of the phenomenon against which the representational counterstrategies of exemplary graphic novels can be recognized. While the focus of my investigation is specifically on the rejection of refugees, the mechanisms by which the resentment against refugee populations is enabled, fostered, and perpetually reproduced might target any minority. Moreover, the rejection of refugees is a highly intersectional political stance. Anti-refugee sentiment is usually paralleled and combined with any number of exclusionary attitudes, such as, for example, misogyny, racism, Islamophobia.[31]

[30] Oksana Yakushko, *Modern-Day Xenophobia: Critical Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on the Roots of Anti-Immigrant Prejudice*, Palgrave Pivot, Springer Link (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00644-0.
[31] For a more detailed exploration of the intersectional nature of general xenophobia, see Yakushko, *Xenophobia*, 2.

The hatred of refugees and "others" is not a spontaneous or arbitrary occurrence, and neither is its introduction or reintroduction into the public sphere. According to Carolin Emcke "hatred is collective, and it is ideologically moulded. … The concepts in which humiliation is doled out, the chains of association and the images that organize hateful thinking and sorting, the filters of perception that categorize and condemn – all these need preparation. Hatred does not break out suddenly; it is cultivated."[32] Hateful ideas "have to be presented, narrated, illustrated, again and again, until they leave a residue in the form of dispositions."[33] Hostility targeted at refugees is not the instantaneous translation of a given nature into action. Rather, it is the result of a conviction that is carved out over time by persistent reiteration. Hence, narrative patterns that facilitate this reiteration are essential to the installation of dynamics in which hatred flourishes.

A central strategy that permeates anti-refugee narratives is a reduction of survival migrant identities to singular parameters, such as their religious affiliation with Islam or their Latin American ethnicity. These categories then overwrite the belonging to other social formations and erase any distinct life trajectories that might inform the complex composition of individual identity. Moreover, the category that is selected as the main focus is predefined by the party that is framing the object of their hatred.[34] The public image of Muslim populations then devolves into stereotypes of people who are "at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible."[35] Homi K. Bhabha theorizes the stereotype in terms of its ambiguity as the simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. One integral aspect of his conception is that the specific stereotyped

[32] Carolin Emcke, *Against Hate*, trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), xiv-xv.
[33] Emcke, *Against Hate*, 26.
[34] Emcke, *Against Hate*, 28.
[35] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 101.

characteristics cannot ever be fully proven.[36] He provides a psychological foundation for the formation of this discriminatory kind of pseudo-knowledge which serves to marginalize targeted populations. The constant reiteration of certain narratives and images only seeks to create differentiation which ultimately confirms the subject position of the population in power, and the fraudulent idea of their primacy. The transformation of the perception of Muslims in Western countries is a potent example of this process. Key events such as 9/11, the attacks in Paris in 2015, as well as the multiple instances of rape on New Year's Eve in Cologne 2015, act as a catalyst for changing views on migrant populations, including, but not limited to refugees.[37] Emcke describes how "[e]very single Muslim and every single Muslimah (although mainly male Muslims are implicated) is treated here as representing all Muslims. Which Muslim or migrant is instrumentalized for this purpose is arbitrary, as long as they can be used as examples to demonstrate the alleged wickedness of the whole group."[38] Danish politician Rasmus Brygger is even more explicit, stating that "we in our minds combine Muslims with radical Islam and terrorism, we combine immigrants with crime and rape. So you have this idea of a collective Muslim, and that's a very dangerous thing."[39] This reduction equalling all Muslims with the radical few that perpetrate crimes overlooks the fact that large minorities of Muslim people have long been living in Western countries, participating in and contributing to society in peace.[40] Hence, a specific image of Muslim immigrants is promoted that replaces any previous notions of this population and enables its ostracizing.

[36] Homi K. Bhabha, "Other Question," 94-95.
[37] For references on these events and their aftermath, see for example Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Justice* (London: Verso, 2020), 77; Polakow-Suransky, *Go Back*, 1-2, 105.
[38] Emcke, *Against Hate*, 27.
[39] Quoted in Polakow-Suransky, *Go Back*, 80.
[40] For a concrete example from Denmark, see Polakow-Suransky, *Go Back*, 77-78.

The fabrication of such a limited notion of survival migrants depends not only on what *is* depicted, but also on what is *omitted* in order to prevent empathy and acceptance. Such acts of constricted representation invoke the concept of the frame. In her study of media representations of the Iraq war, Judith Butler observes that "[t]he frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality."[41] The use of the word "reality" stands out. Although any conception shaped by consumed information must be necessarily mediated, the process of mediation is often disregarded, and what is seen, heard, or read becomes truth to the consumer.[42] For Butler, the war in Iraq is not just passively depicted through visual representations, but visual representation actively partakes in warfare by forging public consent to keep the war going.[43] This tautological pattern also illuminates the hateful reactions to incoming survival migration, especially in the form of public resistance, such as PEGIDA. The assumptions underlying such activism are actively produced and continually reproduced through mediated content. The continuous distribution and redistribution of reductive images of survival migrants as the source of terror and violence results in a metonymic act of recognition in which refugee populations cannot appear as anything but arbiters of chaos and unrest. In consequence, by the time violence against refugees erupts, they have, in Butler's terms, long stopped counting as lives to the perpetrators.

The complicated relationship between framed narratives and the reality that is perceived via this content opens the field for a critique of circulating anti-refugee narratives. Like most media content that is consumed for the sake of information, images rendering refugees as deserving objects of rejection, even outright hatred, usually claim to depict a reality that lies

[41] Butler, *Frames of War*, xiii.
[42] Butler, *Frames of War*, xi.
[43] Butler, *Frames of War*, x-xii.

outside their narrative. Yet the relationship between narrative and its extratextual reality is not so straightforward.[44] An illustration of these complications has been delivered by online journalist David Steiner, who fact-checked social media posts showing European trains and train stations that have supposedly been needlessly trashed by refugees and then left in chaos. His research shows that one of the posts in question contains a photo which had already been posted on a Russian social network in 2007, long before the recent migration crisis, and yet another shows a train vandalized by German football fans, rather than survival migrants.[45] When these images were recontextualized for the purpose of anti-refugee propaganda, they were prepared for an audience that already presumes that refugees are dirty, destructive, and bring nothing but disorder. To this audience, the photographs could then become tangible evidence which objectively confirms the "reality" that was already preconceived. This is also exemplary of the anxious repetition that is required by the stereotype, despite the fact that its "truth" is already known by those who believe in it.[46]

Implicit in this dynamic is the essential weakness of the frame, which "constantly breaks from its context."[47] In other words, as a frame delineates what is "inside" itself, it also points towards the world beyond its own content. Butler elaborates on this characteristic of the frame:

> Although framing cannot always contain what it seeks to make visible or readable, it remains structured by the aim of instrumentalizing certain versions of reality. This means that the frame is always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimating alternative versions of reality, discarded negatives of the official version. … When

[44] For a more detailed elaboration on this dilemma of the frame, see Butler, *Frames of War*, 8-12.
[45] David Steiner, "Hoax-Watch: Die Wahrheit über Flüchtlinge? (2)," mokant.at, accessed October 27, 2021, http://mokant.at/1601-falschmeldungen-fluechtlinge-fake-bilder-hoax-2/.
[46] Homi K. Bhabha, "Other Question," 94-95.
[47] Butler, *Frames of War*, 10.

versions of reality are excluded or jettisoned to a domain of unreality, then specters are produced that haunt the ratified version of reality, animated and de-ratifying traces.[48]

Another example from Steiner's fact-checking article showcases this process of "de-realizing and de-legitimating." One posted image allegedly contains a photograph of the central station of Munich, Germany, again completely covered in garbage after the arrival of refugees, accompanied by a cynical note on their cultural contribution. The photograph in this image, according to Steiner, has actually been taken at Keleti train station in Budapest, Hungary, where refugees were contained for multiple days as they were blocked from travelling on to Austria.[49] While there is once again misinformation about the location involved, the chaos in this image has indeed been caused by refugees. However, the reason for the shocking state in which the site was left was not misbehaviour on the side of the migrants. Instead, it was caused by the desperate conditions of their containment. Hence, it is arguably a product of Hungary's unwillingness to accommodate and support the travellers.[50]

This alternative interpretation of the situation depicted in the image is precisely the kind of narrative that the hostile framing of refugees seeks to discard on "a rubbish heap whose animated debris provides the potential resources for resistance."[51] Via my analysis of a set of comics and graphic novels, I aim to scrutinize how the medium of comics specifically facilitates this resistance.[52] The form's suitability to make such a contribution is implicitly suggested by

---

[48] Butler, *Frames of War*, xiii.
[49] Steiner, "Hoax-Watch."
[50] The Hungarian government refused to aid the refugees who set up a temporary camp in the subway underpass. They eventually set out for Austria on foot to escape the dire conditions. See Ali Emre Benli, "March of refugees: an act of civil disobedience," *Journal of Global Ethics* 14, no. 3 (2018), 315-331, https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2018.1502204; Emma Graham-Morrison, "At Keleti station in Budapest, the refugees could wait no longer," *The Guardian*, September 6, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/06/keleti-station-budapest-refugees.
[51] Butler, *Frames of War*, xiii.
[52] Similar to my thrust, Nina Mickwitz argued that refugee comics "speak back" to repressive measures by powers inadequately addressing their needs. See "Refugee Stories," 279-280.

Hillary Chute, who argues that "while all media do the work of framing, comics manifests material frames – and the absences between them. It thereby literalizes on the page the work of framing and making, and also what framing excludes."[53] Hence, the visibility of actual frames in comics is not a mere physical repetition of framing in the most basic sense, rather it is a mature act of narrative structuring that signals awareness for what lies beyond the story that is told, an idea that I return to in the final introductory section. My proposition is that the reframing of refugees within panel borders can function effectively as an intervention against the dehumanizing images and rhetoric that have shaped their depiction over the last decade.

A Brief Selective History of the Refugee in Graphic Literature

In her short survey of the field of refugee comics between 2012 and 2018, Candida Rifkind acknowledges that "[e]xperiences of immigration, migration, exile, and diaspora have a long and rich history in global comics."[54] Nina Mickwitz sees refugee comics as emblematic of "an orientation towards topical and socio-political issues in the contemporary cycle of non-fiction comics," and as sharing "a genealogy that includes autobiographical comics."[55] Both scholars outline vital and productive maps of the current field, drawing attention to the particular relevance of publishing practices and platforms, funding, and commissioning in the context of graphic literature on and by refugees. However, the historical roots of refugee comics remain submerged in the general topical nexus of migration, and the generic ancestry of graphic autobiography. By pointing out a small selection of examples, I demonstrate that refugee comics – works focussed on the subject of survival migrants – can be traced back further as a specific

[53] Chute, *Disaster*, 17.
[54] Rifkind, "Spotlight."
[55] Mickwitz, "Refugee Stories," 283.

sub-category or -genre of its own. Thereby I attempt to show that graphic narrative has historically participated in shaping the public image of the refugee, though with varying intentions and to varying effect.

While the term comics remains the perpetual subject of literary-historical debate, so does the socio-historical concept of the refugee.[56] Moreover, Marguerite Nguyen and Catherine Fung suggest that "while refugee status is a historically and politically situated entity granted by specific laws and acts, the state of being a refugee is represented as a universal condition, made recognizable by common signifiers: desperate masses traversing war-torn landscapes or dangerous waters, stranded on boats or crowded in camps."[57] In other words, the refugee experience of people forcibly displaced around the globe at different stages of history has some archetypal currency. Before awareness of climate change, the globally dominant driver of survival migration, directly or indirectly, was armed conflict.[58] This means that early graphic narrative on war likely implied the displacement inherently caused by that war.

Hillary Chute reads Francisco Goya's series of etchings *Disasters of War* (1810-1820) as a ground-breaking example of visual-verbal depiction of the disastrous consequences of warfare, and claims that Goya is one of the first artist-reporters, which aligns him genealogically with contemporary artists like prominent modern-day comics journalist Joe Sacco.[59] The captions of

---

[56] For examples on comics, see Hillary Chute, *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere* (New York: Harper, 2017); Ben Saunders, "Divisions in Comics Scholarship," *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 124, no. 1 (2009): 292–94, doi:10.1632/S0030812900168919; Laurence Grove, "Scotland, the Cradle of Comics," *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 134, no. 3 (2019): 601-13, doi:10.1632/pmla.2019.134.3.601. For historical explorations of the refugee, see notes 17-20.

[57] Nguyen, Marguerite, and Catherine Fung, "Refugee Cultures: Forty Years after the Vietnam War," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 41, no. 3 (2016): 1-7. muse.jhu.edu/article/631769.

[58] This is shown by the legal history of the modern concept of refugeehood outlined in section 2. When the issue of global survival migration first entered the political consciousness in Europe and elsewhere, it was perceived as a problem related to and delineated by armed conflict.

[59] Chute, *Disaster*, 39-40.

plates 44 and 45 read "I saw it!" and "And this too."[60] While the verbal part of these two specific etchings addresses the act of witnessing that is so crucial to trauma, the actual images show people running away in panic from whatever "it" is they saw (44), or moving slowly in front of an abandoned battlefield, carrying children and possessions (45). Although the immediacy and sheer cruelty of the violence depicted in many other images of Goya overshadows these two examples, they constitute an early depiction of survival migration, one that is clearly critical of the effects of war, seeking to display the humanitarian catastrophe it precipitates.

Neither was every drawn depiction of war in the history of graphic narrative critical of open conflict, nor was every such rendering documentary or even journalistic in ambition.[61] One unlikely character to emerge from a refugee background is none other than Superman himself, entering the stage of commercial comics in 1938.[62] Furthermore, Superman-creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were both children of Jewish immigrants who came to North America fleeing the rising tide of European anti-Semitism – in other words: survival migrants.[63] Of course, this is not to suggest Superman be included under the umbrella of refugee comics, but it shows that the cultural trope of the refugee lends itself to a diverse range of manifestations which do not exclude any genres per se, regardless where on the "factual-fictional continuum" they are located.[64] In fact, Julio Anta's *Home*, one of the works selected for examination in the final chapter of this thesis, is a superhero comic about a Latin American immigrant boy.

A key characteristic of refugee comics is the prevalent practice of commissioning by NGOs.[65] As early as 1959, the UNHCR itself commissioned "[a] [r]eport in [w]ords and

[60] Quoted in Chute, *Disaster*, 58.
[61] Mickwitz, "Refugee Stories," 279.
[62] Chute, *Why*, 34, 71.
[63] Chute, *Why*, 70-71.
[64] Mickwitz, "Refugee Stories," 279.
[65] Rifkind, "Spotlight;" Mickwitz, "Refugee Stories," 278.

[d]rawings" from artist Kaye Webb and writer Ronald Searle to support fundraising efforts.[66] The resulting publication showcases the tragic stories of individuals, often people rejected for immigration "[b]ecause they are either not young enough, healthy enough, clever enough, or even not good enough; because they have not succeeded in capturing anyone's imagination."[67] This specific description of the discriminatory practice of immigration authorities and their rigid, exclusionary legal frameworks emphasizes an agenda of resistance. Graphic narrative has been actively employed to foster among the reading public an image of refugees that counters the narrow vision of legal authorities and contributes to increased funding efforts, but also, eventually, the change of immigration law. Naturally, employing graphic narrative in this way can also work against refugees, as is shown by Mickwitz, who provides more recent controversial examples from Germany and Australia of comics attempting to dissuade survival migrants from attempting immigration.[68] This highlights that the powerful narrative potential facilitated by the comics medium might be mobilized not to confront misrepresentations of refugees, but to continue them.[69]

Nguyen and Fung further interrogate the conflation of refugee ethics with refugee aesthetics from which a passive image of forced migrants is potentially constructed. They warn that such a cultural rendering might seek to erase the "Euro-American production of refugees" by justifying the intervention of the wider international community. In such a narrative, Western nations might re-emerge as champions of charity, rather than imperialist arbiters of war, colonialism, and, via heavy industrialization and ravenous consumption, climate change.[70] These

[66] Kaye Webb and Ronald Searle, *Refugees 1960: A Report in Words and Drawings by Kaye Webb and Ronald Searle* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 5.
[67] Webb and Searle, *Refugees 1960*, 4.
[68] Mickwitz, "Refugee Stories," 279.
[69] Mickwitz reinforces this crucial point in her conclusion, see "Refugee Stories," 293.
[70] Nguyen and Fung, "Refugee Cultures," 2.

are important concerns pertaining to the representation of refugees in comics and I argue that the works selected for this study demonstrate awareness of this causality and responsibility. Hence, these texts are not participating in a cultural thrust to efface Western responsibility for the causes of survival migration. Instead, they resituate displaced people within the socio-political dynamics of their host societies, where the presence of refugees signifies the urgency for imminent action, and the inevitability of future change. As the direction of this development is negotiated in public discourse, these comics present in different ways a powerful call for inclusive, respectful, progressive, and humane treatment of refugees.

Genre, Fictionalization, and the Documentary Value of Comics

Whether in the form of graphic narrative or otherwise, the political charge of the subject of survival migration pulls into focus issues of factual accuracy and truthful representation. The question of comics' documentary value has seen much scholarly debate, especially regarding works with generic claims to journalism, autobiography, and other genres widely recognized as nonfiction. I develop my argument decidedly in relation to works of both fiction (Anta/Wieszczyk, Tan) and nonfiction (Evans, Glidden) to trouble the rigid opposition of those two categories in the comics form. Some questions circumscribing the field of this investigation are: When does representation become fictional? Is a narrative rooted in fiction or nonfiction because of its affiliation with genre (biography, superhero comic, etc.), or through its physical manifestation in artistic form (for example as comic, prose text, video)? The ambition of my inquiry is not to fundamentally dislodge the categories of fiction and nonfiction, nor to reproduce deconstructive takes on our ability to ever find any "truth" in mediated representation. Instead, I

want to theorize an integral contribution of fictionality to documentary narrative in comics, and in turn the potency of fictional works to convey truth.

It is the act of drawing that blurs the line between factual representation and fantasy specifically in comics, and, thus, shifts the polar fact/fantasy axis away from the clear delineations of specific fiction/nonfiction genres which are either fully one or the other. Through drawing, fact and fiction merge on the page, a process that, I argue, does not inhibit truthfulness or accuracy. This has distinct ramifications for genres traditionally perceived as nonfiction and those that are seen as fictional. Reportage might use visual devices to enhance and supplement their narrative with facts and truths additional to their immediate story. Works of fiction, on the other hand, might undergird their artistic composition with references to history and recent events, which are presented on the page exactly the same way as they would in a documentary work. In both cases, this allows for a different kind of visual readerly engagement, one that is now liberated from the binary of consuming either distilled documentary truth or pure fabrication with little bearings on actual debates in society.

Through the drawn image, a perpetual artistic presence asserts itself on the page in material form. This means that every panel is filtered through the vision and, remarkably, the hands of the cartoonist. No two renderings of the same event or object by different artists in drawn form will be the same.[71] The crucial difference is that the bodily intervention constituted by the act of drawing also implies the human seeing that preceded it.[72] The choice to draw a displaced human subject, and the choice to present them in a specific manner, cannot be reduced to a cold reporterly ethos presuming to bring clear facts to an audience in the same way

[71] Joe Sacco, *Journalism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2021), x. For a discussion of the truth-value of photography in opposition to drawing, see also Chute, *Disaster*, 19-24.
[72] Chute, *Disaster*, 30-31.

photography or filmic evidence might. Joe Sacco praises this quality of comics as a journalistic medium. An approach to documentation based on drawing "hasn't permitted [him] to make a virtue of dispassion."[73] Hence, documentary practice has an ethical dimension. The human element signified through drawing forces the artist to engage this moral aspect and it signals it to the reader.

The ethical weight that comes with documentary work can be obscured by the alleged removal of the subjective human element for example through the use of cameras, while drawing prominently highlights it. Paradoxically, photographic images are often perceived to have a higher degree of "mechanical objectivity."[74] Yet the mimetic accuracy of a photograph does by no means guarantee that what is seen in the image is "true," as Susan Sontag's historical investigation of war photography emphasizes.[75] Furthermore, Sontag contends that sustained narration has a different impact, compared to the condensed event of image consumption: "[h]arrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand."[76] Hence, graphic narration is a powerful tool for an ethical documentary approach, lending itself to stories that aim to acknowledge, rather than turn a blind eye to the human suffering of refugees. Nonetheless, Sacco, Sontag, and Chute are all concerned primarily with works of nonfiction, memoir, journalism, and documentation. Does the "essential truth" that Sacco has in mind when drawing remain a truth when it turns into the background or archetypal inspiration of fictional stories? Here, I want to critique the fact/fiction dichotomy applied to narrative. My contention is that

[73] Sacco, *Journalism*, xii.
[74] Chute, *Disaster*, 20.
[75] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004), 52-55. It is worth adding that the increasing sophistication of editing software, now available on every smartphone, exacerbates this issue by allowing for the manipulation of photographic images even *after* they have been taken. This destabilizes even the claim to mimetic accuracy of the physical environment depicted.
[76] Sontag, *Pain*, 89.

fictionality per se cannot be separated out of documentary texts, especially if they are rendered in the comics form. Rather, fictionality is an integral element of literary works that allows documentary truth to be assimilated and even reiterated by both fiction and nonfiction.

I claim that the narrative process, whether based on actual events or fantasy, gives imaginative expression to the narrator. There is an inherent transformation of narrated subject matter by what Wolfgang Iser calls "fictionalizing acts." Iser identifies three distinct processes by which "the real" is absorbed into narrative: selection, combination, and a text's disclosure of its own fictionality.[77] Those three acts do not mark the mere transition of an event away from reality into fictionality. Instead, "[r]eproduced reality is made to point to a 'reality' beyond itself, while the imaginary is lured into form."[78] Hence, comics depicting a reality, albeit with documentary ambitions, is always pointing at something other than the mere mimetic truth. This might qualify as a narratological reformulation of Sontag's claim that narratives foster understanding instead of purely showing. Moreover, Iser's assertion that an imagination is expressed is reminiscent of Sacco's journalistic voice which does not negate its subjective presence.

Selection, combination, and disclosure lend themselves particularly well to the theorizing of fictionalization in comics because of the artistic demands of the form. To render an actual event, the artist must decide how to sequence it in separate panels in order to be able to map temporal progression onto the page. A simple movement from one point to another might be rendered using any number of panels. Here, the creative process entails acts of both selection and combination. These two acts also imply the ongoing narrative operation of Butlerian framing, in

[77] Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: J. Hopkins University Press, 1993), 4.
[78] Iser, *Fictive*, 3.

which selection itself reveals that there is always more to the story than what is shown in a particular rendering. The comics reader is forced to address this due to the sequential nature of the narrative, often signified by the visible presence of the gutter. According to Scott McCloud, our perception of reality is inherently fragmented, and we make sense of it via a process he calls "closure."[79] This readerly act permeates the consumption of comics with the imaginative reconstruction of what we do *not* see on the page.

The third operation of fictionalizing, the disclosure of the text's own fictionality, is equally foundational to comics, because it is immediately signified by the appearance of drawn images. Iser asserts that literary texts usually attempt to "mask their fictional nature. The masking, of course, need not necessarily occur with the intention to deceive; it occurs because the fiction is meant to provide an explanation, or even a foundation … The concealment of fictionality endows an explanation with an *appearance* of reality, which is vital, because fiction–as explanation–functions as the constitutive basis of this reality."[80] While I agree with the final assertion that fiction can help its readers to make sense of their reality, I argue that comics, regardless of genre, cannot attempt such masking because they are hand-drawn. What distinguishes nonfiction works from fictional comics is not whether fictionalizing acts are involved in the narration – they always are. Rather, each genre manifests a different, specific relationship between depicted reality and the imagination that is shaping this depiction on the page. The construction of a reality beyond the text differs, depending on whether it narrates in a mode that subscribes to telling "real" stories, such as journalism or autobiography, or to relating fantasies, such as superhero comics. How Tan, Anta/Wieszczyk, Glidden, and Evans handle this

[79] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper, 1993), 61-63.
[80] Iser, *Fictive*, 12.

and to what effect on the subject matter of refugee comics will be the subject of my subsequent explorations.

The second chapter of this thesis focuses on *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis*, a documentary work set during the height of the Syrian refugee wave in 2015/16. I argue that *Threads* shows that survival migration is an integral consequence of global capitalism and a phenomenon which has historically impacted the region of Northern France before the set-up of refugee encampments. Furthermore, my reading interrogates the book's inclusion of hostile quotations from the internet and Evans' critical confrontation of these comments. The third chapter engages *Rolling Blackouts* as an example of comics journalism. Glidden's comic shows how this form of artistic reporterly work lends itself particularly well to a humanizing depiction of refugees. This is due to the emphasis of subjective experience and the predicament of a personal relationship between journalist and subject in order for documentary narration to manifest. The final chapter examines fictional works, beginning with *The Arrival*. Tan's aesthetic approach to fictionalizing refugees consists of radical defamiliarization in order to generate an archetypal immigration story. The close relationship between historic realities and Tan's fantastic world makes *The Arrival* a potent assertion of the humanity of migrants. *Home* combines the archetypal genre of superhero comics with a refugee narrative situated in a recent historical moment during the Trump administration at the Mexican-US border. The work establishes some powerful critical commentary on the situation of Latin American survival migrants and the Latinx community in the US through the interplay between generic conventions and the real political scenario that drives the fictional plot.

2. "It's not a story!!! This is reality!!!"

Encampment, Historical Metaphor, and the Digital in Kate Evans' *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis*

During the height of the Syrian refugee wave in 2015-16, Calais saw the erection of the large unofficial camp that became widely known as the "Jungle" and which was eventually cleared out by the French police in October 2016.[81] English artist and activist Kate Evans documents the voluntary participation in the tremendous humanitarian effort at the camp in her autobiographical graphic novel *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis*, first published in book form by Verso in 2017.[82] Evans relates her personal experiences of interactions with the Jungle inhabitants and people in a second camp near Dunkirk, which she supports by building houses, distributing food and goods, but also by confronting the camp inhabitants with her art in the form of portraits. The work shows that a refugee camp is a place of human connection, hospitality, sharing, a space where people laugh, and where art can affect people's lives. *Threads* provides insight into refugee lives in terms of their material, medical, and social conditions and surroundings, as well as their political exclusion and heightened vulnerability to police violence and also civilian attacks and interference by criminals.

---

[81] For the history of the Jungle and refugee encampments around Calais more generally, see Oli Mould, "The Calais Jungle: A slum of London's making," *City* 21, no. 3-4 (2017): 388, https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2017.1325231; Zaki Nahaboo and Nathan Kerrigan. *Migrants, Borders and the European Question: The Calais Jungle*. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 2, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75922-3. Notably, in order to prevent the emergence of a new major camp in the area, the destruction of unofficial refugee shelters has become a regular occurrence near Calais until today. For a detailed photographic reportage documenting the dismantling of the Jungle in 2016, see Alan Taylor, "France Dismantles 'The Jungle' in Calais," *The Atlantic*, October 26, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2016/10/france-dismantles-the-jungle-in-calais/505481/.

[82] In the following, I will follow the approach of Candida Rifkind's critical work on *Threads* and refer to the author as Evans, and the character in the book as Kate. See Candida Rifkind, "Migrant Detention Comics and the Aesthetic Technologies of Compassion," in *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage*, eds. Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 303.

My discussion in the first two sections of this chapter examines how *Threads* facilitates the notion of refugees as entrapped by systemic injustice. The work shows that this injustice is an integral element of the modern world order characterized by a globalized capitalism and a system of separate nation-states. I will open my discussion with a comparative analysis of Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life and Judith Butler's notion of grievability and the shared human condition she calls precariousness. The former reveals how refugees and their treatment in *Threads* are a consequence of the political structures that govern Western society, while the latter exposes the need for continuous socio-cultural iteration to uphold the marginalized status of refugees. I will then show how these dynamics become apparent in *Threads*. Humanitarian aid, one core motif of the book, emerges as a simultaneous force of resistance to, and symptom of the exclusionary political order. This characteristic of dialectic tension also pertains to my subsequent exploration of the extended metaphor of lace, through which Evans visualizes the continuities between the economic history of Calais and the rise of the Jungle in a mode that emphasizes both connection and separation. The lace allegory functions through the mechanisms of Iserian fictionalization, which thereby become part of the book's strategy to counter anti-refugee sentiment. The final section of this chapter will focus on Evans' direct engagement of the hateful rhetoric against refugees and volunteers that is emblematic for the proliferation of hostile attitudes in online media. Overall, I propose that *Threads* is a powerful act of comics activism that humanizes refugees and vigorously exposes the profound need for change required to truly solve the humanitarian challenge posed by the migrant crisis.[83]

[83] Evans describes herself as a comics activist in Dominic Davies, "Comics Activism: An Interview with Comics Artist and Activist Kate Evans," *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 7, no. 1 (2017): 18, https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.114.

Agamben, the Jungle, and the Permanence of Refugeehood

During journalist Diane Taylor's 2021 investigation of the situation of refugees in the Calais area, five years after the last sections of the Jungle had been cleared out by French authorities in 2016, an Eritrean refugee told her about his failed attempt to cross the Channel. Just hours before the interview, the man and his companions got stuck at sea because the motor of their boat broke. They called on the French coastguard to save them, only to be told at first to call the British coastguard instead.[84] This anecdote illustrates the situation of refugees in the region, who find themselves rejected by both the United Kingdom and France. Neither country is willing to take adequate measures to provide for displaced people, and the British government has continuously exhibited a particular zest to prevent arrivals at all cost.[85] When the Syrian civil war sparked a wave of survival migration into the EU in 2015, this constellation shaped the conditions in the emerging camps in Calais and Dunkirk, which have been described as "deplorable … Many sleep close to the ground and are forced to endure squalid toilet facilities. Some suffer with infectious diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis, and are in need of urgent medical treatment. They are exposed to assault, ethnic and police violence, sexual exploitation, infectious disease, and psychological illness."[86] In other words, the dangerous predicament of survival migrants encountered by Kate in *Threads* thoroughly unveils their precariousness, the shared human condition based on mutual basic needs defined by Butler.[87] The British and French

[84] Diane Taylor, "Life, death and limbo in the Calais 'Jungle' – five years after its demolition," *Guardian*, November 2, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/02/life-death-and-limbo-in-the-calais-jungle-five-years-after-its-demolition.
[85] For the drastic changes proposed to UK immigration policy by Home Secretary Priti Patel in 2021, see UNHCR, "The Nationality and Borders Bill," unhcr.org, https://www.unhcr.org/uk/uk-immigration-and-asylum-plans-some-questions-answered-by-unhcr.html. Accessed December 9, 2021.
[86] Gerry Clare et al., "The Calais 'Jungle'," *The British Journal of General Practice: The Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners* 66, no. 651 (2016): 510. https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp16X687193. See also Polakow-Suransky, *Go Back*, 130.
[87] Butler, *Frames*, 13.

governments, however, have exercised their political power to ensure the persistent marginalization of refugees in the area, and thereby the differentiation between their state citizens and survival migrants. Officially, this differential marks an extraordinary state which is supposed to be temporary. Time has shown, however, that existing power constellations work to maintain this condition permanently. When refugees take enormous risks in order to escape life-threatening or dehumanizing circumstances, they usually expect their exposure to deprivation and danger to cease soon after their journey. During her first walk through the Jungle in October 2015, Kate recognizes that "everywhere there is an air of expectation, of impermanence. People who have been on the move for so long are stuck in limbo, tantalisingly close to their destination, but the wrong side of those cruel fences, still so very far."[88] In contrast to this notion held by the refugee population, Agamben proclaims that the "vocation [of the camp] is precisely to realize permanently the exception."[89] Hence, the lack of human rights security that marks the exceptionality of the refugee state becomes permanent in the camp space.

Agamben grounds the presence of camps in a systemic crisis of the modern nation-state. The political system of nations was "founded on the functional nexus between a determinate localization (territory) and a determinate order (state), which was mediated by automatic regulations for the inscription of life (birth and life)."[90] In reference first and foremost to concentration camps during the Third Reich, Agamben explains that camps are the mechanism by which the state manages the part of the population which fails to satisfy a nation-state's criteria for the inscription of "natural life," that is life whose political participation is approved. This exposes problematic elements in the foundational logic of the nation, which does *not*

[88] Evans, *Threads*, 8.
[89] Giorgio Agamben, "What Is a Camp?," in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 40.
[90] Agamben, "Camp," 43.

recognize life equally based on a shared humanity, as is suggested by Butler. Rather, it distinguishes between those who belong and those who do not, or, in Agamben's words "[t]he increasingly widening gap between birth (naked life) and nation-state is the new fact of the politics of our time and what we are calling 'camp' is this disparity."[91] The most overt example of this is the institution of citizenship, and the rights and opportunities that a certain passport grants or forecloses. The experiences of refugees, including, of course, those depicted by Evans, show the extreme consequences of this political superstructure for the lives of survival migrants. They are not recognized as citizens, but as what Agamben calls "bare life," a life that "may be killed and yet not sacrificed."[92]

The concepts of Butlerian grievability and the duality of natural life and bare life in Agamben are two distinct approaches to comprehending the exclusion of vulnerable populations such as refugees. While Agamben is primarily interested in the historical-political developments of the constellation he explores, and the mechanisms by which they operate in nation-states, Butler insists on an ethical approach. Her contention is that the distinctions that enable hostile treatment of specific communities depend on persistent reiteration and framing. Agamben, then, provides insights into the political structures that are invested in the division of populations, while Butler examines how persistent division manifests culturally. Both writers ultimately critique systemic injustice, Agamben by disclosing the malevolent system and its historical background, Butler by identifying how this injustice depends on human action. Through the empathetic narration of refugee stories, *Threads* provides a counterframe that recenters survival migrants as equal humans, and the work does so consciously. At the same time, however, the text

[91] Agamben, "Camp," 43-44.
[92] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

also identifies the political and economic system which gave birth to a social hierarchy that renders refugees expendable, and in which humanitarian organizations, despite their important work, participate.

In the act of humanitarian aid, according to Agamben, the division between the life of a state citizen and bare life is revealed and reaffirmed.[93] He writes "[t]he refugee must be considered for what he is: nothing less than a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state, from the birth-nation to the man-citizen link, and that thereby makes it possible to clear the way for a long-overdue renewal of categories in the service of a politics in which bare life is no longer separated and excepted, either in the state order or in the figure of human rights."[94] Yet the exposure of these "fundamental categories" by survival migrants triggers two main responses: on the one hand, the deplorable situation of refugees motivates support, for example in the form of charity work, donations, legal advice. On the other hand, survival migrants are met with hostility, rejection, and exclusion, which may come in the form of political action or police violence, but also criminal assault.[95] Although the actions of Kate, her husband, and the other volunteers give voice to their recognition of the refugees as equal fellow-human beings, it is what simultaneously enables the survival of refugees in said conditions, and thereby the continuation of the injustice they are subordinated to, without ever engaging the systemic roots of the problem.

The friction between these two consequences of humanitarian intervention is visible in *Threads*. When Kate first enters the Dunkirk camp to distribute oranges, she encounters a child's "pure smile," despite the fact that a restriction to build wooden shelters on the muddy grounds of

[93] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 133.
[94] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 134.
[95] For the examples from Evans' text, see *Threads*, 10, 18, 28-31, 117-118, 127-131, 136-139, 154-160.

the park exposes them to the harsh autumnal weather conditions. Kate bursts into tears, exclaiming "[w]hat are we fucking doing!? We can't solve this with oranges! The kids are all here! They're all stuck here! When does this stop being someone else's problem?!!!"[96] This brief moment of desperation, strengthened by the extensive use of exclamation and question marks, shows the awareness of the volunteers for the insufficiency of their efforts to bring tangible change in the lives of the refugees. Agamben's theoretical framework suggests an answer to the rhetorical question that Kate asks in the Dunkirk rain: the refugee crisis might stop being someone else's problem once the structures of modernity and its nation-states are fundamentally reformed, if not replaced entirely. This is where the dialectic energy of the crisis inserts itself in full force because the answer to this difficult situation cannot be to cease charitable efforts altogether. The moral compass of the contemporary left, to which Evans belongs, recognizes the humanity of refugees, and must result in humanitarian aid.[97] Abandoning the effort to sustain the deprived refugee communities would be tantamount to acknowledging their lives as not grievable, not worth preserving. Yet preserving them by means of charity constitutes them as bare life, too.

This tautology provides state authorities interested in preserving the status quo with a substantial grip on political movements that are in favour of refugee support. How this takes effect is experienced by Kate while working in the Jungle. In a somewhat comical early episode, Kate notices the abominable state of the sanitary facilities. Seeing the toilet makes her decide to hold on, and she spits out the drinking water as she is told it contains "faecal contamination."[98]

---

[96] Evans, *Threads*, 64.
[97] For a comment on Evans' political orientation, see Harriet Earle, "The Politics of Lace in Kate Evans' *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (2017)," *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 10, no. 1 (2020): 9, https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.215.
[98] Evans, *Threads*, 14.

The onomatopoeic interjections "SPLURT" and "CLENCH," as well as the funny drawings of her facial expressions, make the page a moment of comic relief, despite the essential problem of the refugee settlement that is highlighted. Later on, as Kate returns to move some shelters that are about to be razed by the police, her friend Nadine notices that "[t]he French government is providing water points and rubbish collections," but only due to a lawsuit for negligence, filed by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).[99] Although that somewhat alleviates the sanitary crisis in the camp, the judge also "ruled that the volunteers are doing such a good job of providing food and shelter that the authorities don't need to."[100] This court sentence is a strong institutional signal that refugees and state citizens are not on equal footing. The judicial apparatus effectively confirms that the full protection of the basic rights of the Jungle inhabitants is not a government concern. Although some needs, such as the sanitary requirements, are now to be provided for, sustenance remains the burden of those individuals who are personally invested in the support of the refugee communities. Nadine goes on to ask "[o]ur relief effort – it's just a band-aid isn't it?" Kate reassuringly responds, "[o]nly in that it would hurt a lot of people if you suddenly removed it."[101] While Kate proclaims her resistance to Agamben's biopolitical categories of bare life/citizen by arguing in favour of persistent support for refugees, she necessarily perpetuates the power dynamics that maintain the exclusion of refugees via their inclusion as an exception to the rule.

The interaction between volunteers and refugees, especially the numerous shared meals and the collaborative activities in the Good Chance Theatre Dome, arguably constitute the timid formation of an intercultural community that unites members of both Agambian registers. It is

[99] Evans, *Threads*, 40.
[100] Evans, *Threads*, 41.
[101] Evans, *Threads*, 41.

again the intervention of the judicial institutions which emphasizes that the divide between bare life and politically qualified life remains intact. Evans demonstrates awareness for this through her narrative voice, as she introduces the chapter that documents the destruction of the camp in March 2016: "[t]o soften the blow, the courts announced that only the refugees' homes would be demolished, not the communal spaces erected and run by European volunteers (and really think about those priorities for a second)."[102] The parenthetical comment pulls the reader's attention towards the double-standards directing this decision. The court deems it ethically feasible to push people off their provisional homes, but communal areas which will lose their purpose without a local community are protected because they are the domain of people recognized as members of political society, and, by implication, because they are European. Instead of siding "with the traumatized, the destitute, the vulnerable" on the basis of their shared humanity or, in Butler's terms, precariousness, the court decision confirms that this human condition is distributed differentially. The authorities "promised a gradual, humanitarian effort to reduce the size of the camp. And they lied. They sent in the riot police."[103] The oxymoronic concept of a "humanitarian" way to forcefully remove a population from their living space exposes the systemic foundation of this injustice, namely that the humanity of the volunteers and that of the refugees are not the same to the powers that be. As such, the promise of a humane procedure is only belied by the violent practice in the eyes of those who refuse the notion of this divide, insisting on an equal precariousness and the grievability of refugee lives. Evans' rhetoric leaves no doubt about her own dispositions, and the text's relentless and conscious highlighting of the discriminatory dynamics in which the Jungle refugees are trapped makes *Threads* a work of resistance against this structural imbalance.

[102] Evans, *Threads*, 153.
[103] Evans, *Threads*, 153.

One crucial aspect of the exceptional status of survival migrants and bare life in general is that it is a permanent necessity to the political system so that it can thereby reaffirm its own internal truth of a correlation between birth, place, and nationality. The Eritrean man who was referred to the British coastguards by the French describes this predicament: "I do not know what I can do now. I can't go back and I can't go forward. There is a lot of racism in this situation. We need to find peace. If we have no peace we have no life."[104] This tragic permanence is repeatedly illustrated in the graphic novel. One refugee, Zimarko, has abandoned his plans to ever reach the UK and focuses on the improvement of conditions in the camp.[105] When Kate sits around the campfire with Kurdish people, she identifies that the refugees are "eternally propelled onwards in a desperate search for somewhere less hostile than every other European country they encounter. I gaze into the flames. I doubt they'll find it."[106] Her disillusionment functions as a confirmation of the rigidity of the structural exclusion by a political system unwilling to assimilate the survival migrants and depending on their exclusion to continually assert that the functional nexus of birth, place, and nationality is intact. After the Calais Jungle is demolished in early March 2016, a new camp is built by MSF and the Dunkirk mayor, but this also is "not a real home, it's not their final destination," because a "real home" is a marker of precisely the kind of belonging that is denied to refugees.[107]

The institutional discrimination and marginalization experienced by the survival migrants is also the expression of a paradox which discloses the crisis of modernity that Agamben points out. Refugees are pushed away in order to remove their community from view and restore the harmonious function of the nation-state as legal-institutional expression of territorial and

[104] Diane Taylor, "Life, death and limbo."
[105] Evans, *Threads*, 42.
[106] Evans, *Threads*, 21.
[107] Evans, *Threads*, 168.

biological belonging. The lack of apt provision for the number of people living in the Jungle past the eradication shows this. Kate comments that "[t]he message is clear. People are expected to disappear."[108] This invokes her perception from the opening pages, where she notices that "[t]hese people don't count."[109] The stability of a globally interconnected world that still upholds the political divisions into localized nation-states and a cultural paradigm of national belonging requires the continued encampment of populations who destabilize said divisions. Despite the clearance of the camp half a decade earlier, the number of survival migrants arriving to Britain by boat reached a new high in October 2021.[110] This shows that the spatial limitation of camp dwellings results in nothing but further suffering and hardship for the encamped population. Camps as such are not the problem, they are a symptom. My contextualization of *Threads* with Agamben's concept of bare life shows that refugees are held in place by dialectic tension that makes the material, medical, and social support at once a rebellion against systemic injustice and a mechanism enabling further systemic neglect. This implies the need for profound socio-economic and political change on a global scale to truly alleviate the refugee crisis. The dialectic of connection and separation extends into the most prominent artistic device of the text, which will be the focus of the following section.

The Dialectic Metaphor of Lace

Threads maps its plot events onto the local history of Calais and onto the political climate between France and the United Kingdom in 2015/16. The continuous visual and verbal metaphor of lace, a patterned fabric woven from yarn threads, visualizes both interconnectedness and

[108] Evans, *Threads*, 59.
[109] Evans, *Threads*, 8.
[110] Haroon Siddique, "1,100 migrants cross Channel on small boats to UK in two days," *Guardian*, October 10, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/oct/10/1100-migrants-cross-channel-small-boats-uk-two-days.

separation as an interpretive lens through which camp life is depicted. This is achieved by the dual operation of the metaphor. On the one hand, the work represents individual threads that constantly intersect in lace fabric as an icon of interpersonal relationships. A web of social interactions emerges, and the frequent crossing of life paths that shapes the situation in the camp becomes visible in the gutter of *Threads*, which Evans fills with lace throughout. Lace as a traditional product of the Calais region is also imbued with connotations of oppressive industrial and capitalist power structures which have governed the life of the domestic population long before the arrival of survival migrants. Thus, *Threads* shows that the Calais Jungle is a symptom of an injustice that is ubiquitous, transcendent, and that has oppressed Western working classes just as much as it now oppresses refugees arriving from outside Europe. The lace metaphor is therefore charged with a dialectic significance which highlights the conflicting affective responses this crisis produces. The sheer suffering and precarity of refugees invites help and charitable effort. Yet volunteers like Kate and her husband are also inevitably caught up in a global capitalist economy which privileges them over the people it has forcefully displaced. Similarly, refugees might spark hostile and violent reactions, but the participants of such action, despite their current superior position in relation to the vulnerable survival migrants, are equally held in place by that same oppressive structure.

The history of lace production in Calais is the motif of the book's narrative frame. It is the development between the industrial stages shown in the opening and closing pages that invigorates the lace gutter with historical valence and highlights that capitalist development is the crucial driver of displacement. In the full-page panel that opens the text, four women in historic dress sit in the foreground knitting bobbin lace against a panoramic view of Calais and its ferry harbour (Fig. 1). Yet, the lace they are producing does not have an artful pattern.

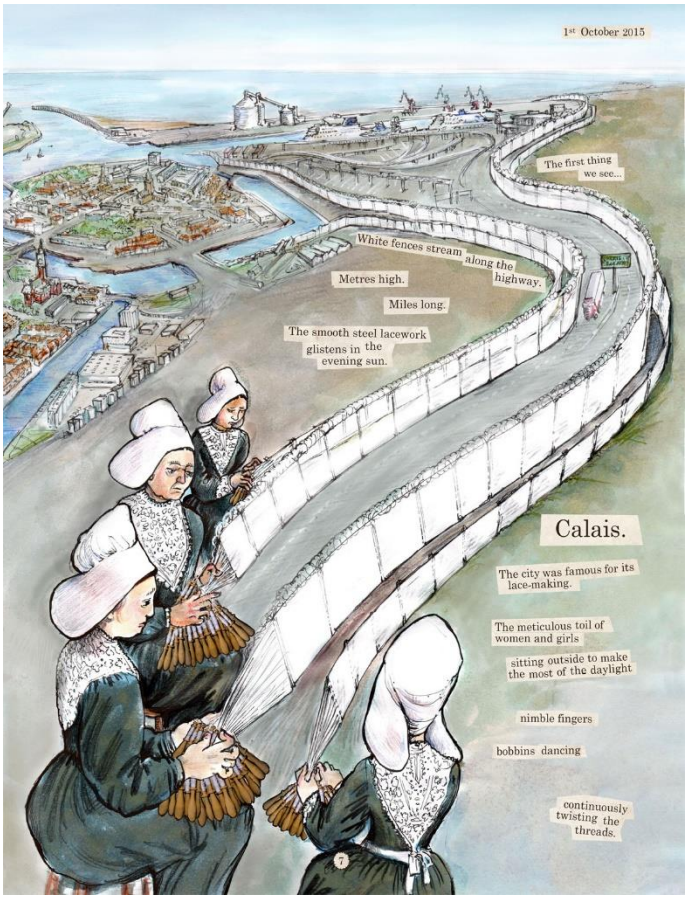

Figure 1 *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis*, page 7 (permission of Verso Books)

Instead, the material converges into the fences that line the road leading away from the Calais harbour.[111] Stripes of lace fabric, then, replace the gutter, the conventionally blank space between comic panels, throughout the entire book. The final page of *Threads* also depicts women workers involved in the production of lace, but instead of handmaking it, they merely process the output of a weaving machine and stack it into blocks forming a wall-like structure (Fig. 2). The text of the page states that on "21st September 2016 The British government begins construction of a £2 million, four-metre-high wall around the port of Calais."[112] Salient differences between

[111] Evans, *Threads*, 7.
[112] Evans, *Threads*, 176.

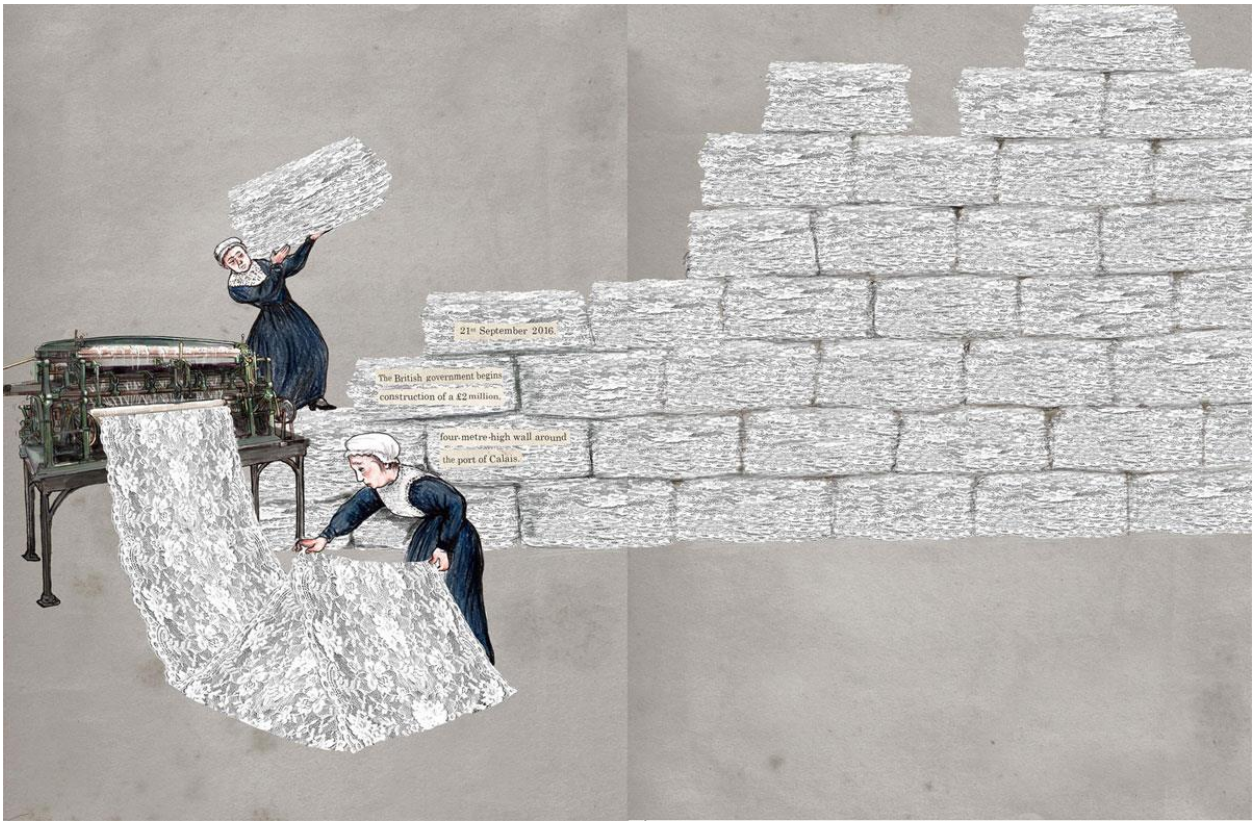

Figure 2 *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis*, page 176-177 (permission of Verso Books)

the opening and closing pages are the number of workers, which goes down from four to a mere two, and the amount of produced lace, which increases drastically. In the beginning, the lacework only feeds a steel fence which does not even completely hide the camp from vision. At the end, a full wall is erected by means of work that is now technologized and industrialized. A notable continuity between both depictions of labour is the grave and sad facial expressions of the workers. The reduction in the number of labourers suggests that displacement is an integral force of a capitalist development that precedes the Jungle. The story of the camp told in *Threads* is thus the iteration of a recurring event in the process of capitalism's growth: the violent rejection of disadvantaged populations from societal participation and material sustenance. Moreover, framing almost every panel in the book with lace while exploring the local past of the

product in the opening and closing pages grounds the humanitarian crisis witnessed by Kate in the history of the industrial-capitalist order itself.

Early on, Evans establishes that the lace metaphor transcends the socio-economic divisions solidified by the local history of lace production. Instead, it is a dual symbol that also highlights the social interconnection produced by the camp as a meeting place. As Kate first sets foot in the Jungle, she finds "[e]verywhere, little interactions, points of connection, life's threads crossing."[113] The social network of the emerging refugee community allegorically reproduces precisely the work of weaving done by the workers in the opening. This positive function of lacework stands in contrast with the "smooth steel" barrier into which the fabric transforms on the first page.[114] Lace immediately gains its two-fold significance, being at once a material expression of human connection within the camp and the product of an economic system that results in and relies upon material and social division.

The detrimental impact of progressive industrialization emphasized by the opening and closing pages also implies that the critiqued capitalist dynamic is not a local phenomenon, but a transnational one. The machine that is used to produce lace in enormous quantities on the final page is an English invention brought to Calais from Nottingham in 1816, together with English workers who "founded an English colony."[115] A likely reason for the choice of Calais as a production site of the Nottingham business owners was to evade British taxes.[116] As a consequence of the technological innovation migrating from England, the handmaking of lace disappeared in the region.[117] This exemplifies how exclusionary mechanisms of industrial

[113] Evans, *Threads*, 8.
[114] Evans, *Threads*, 7.
[115] Rifkind, "Detention Comics," 304.
[116] Harriet Earle, "Politics,"16.
[117] Rifkind, "Detention Comics," 305.

production networks exceed the local context. The wider geographical reach of the refugee crisis in the main narrative shows by extension that the reach of this system is indeed global. Thus, lace stands for a historical trajectory in which the people of Calais and the camp inhabitants have not only in the past been impacted and overpowered by external forces, but continue to be so today.

The dialectic of simultaneous structural exclusion and physical connection signified on the page by lace also illuminates the international constellation between France and the UK which is the most important catalyst for the appearance of unofficial settlements in the first place. Early in *Threads*, a refugee explains that "the UK asylum-processing office in Calais was closed down in 2002."[118] Urban scholar Oli Mould locates in this event the crucial impulse for the beginning of unofficial refugee camps in the area.[119] Mould, himself a volunteer in the Jungle in early 2016, argues "that the Jungle was a product of the politico-economic processes of power that seek to ossify London's place atop global city hierarchies."[120] He proposes a reading of the Jungle as the removed slum of London, which mobilizes its significant financial and political potential to ensure that survival migrants cannot immigrate to Britain. This includes British funding for the fortification of the Calais port, but also monetary support for the police in Calais.[121] In contrast, the British entrepreneurs who transferred the production of Nottingham lace to Calais experienced the Channel border as point of international connection, despite the decline in the local French economy caused by their export. Similarly, Kate crosses the border multiple times in the book, travelling to Calais to help and back. As a British citizen (and thereby

[118] Evans, *Threads*, 12.
[119] Mould, "London's making," 388. See also Nahaboo and Kerrigan, "European Question," 2.
[120] Mould, "London's making," 389.
[121] Mould, "London's making," 391-392. Still today Britain actively maintains this inhumane transnational dynamic, and more recent decisions of the Johnson government show that the nation's refusal to support and integrate survival migrants remains unbroken. See note 84 for further reference.

EU citizen at the time), she is able to move freely, while the survival migrants encounter the border as an insurmountable obstacle. The Channel border thus enforces social divisions as it remains permeable to some populations while barring others. Considering the fundamentally transformative impact of the Nottingham machine on the local Calais economy, lace frames are indeed an apt device to persistently stress the British involvement in the creation of the preconditions leading to the rise of the Jungle, while also framing the contribution of British individuals such as Kate and many of her fellow volunteers to the support of the refugee community.

The device of lace also points towards the gendered and racialized imbalances within the capitalist order it critiques. The depicted lace-workers in the narrative frame are exclusively white women who are simultaneously oppressed by and participating in a structure which is aimed at the systemic exclusion of the non-white population of the Jungle. This further aspect of the lace dialectic reveals itself in Harriet Earle's observations on the lace product: this fabric serves no purpose other than the aesthetic, it is a northern European invention, and its production has originally been the domain of women. The traditional process of making lace by hand requires ample lighting and is very time-intensive.[122] Invariably, lace is therefore an expression of luxury and privilege, but it is also "carefully bound up in … the gender politics of artistic expression."[123] This double-bind of lace as the expression of both privilege and burden of industrial labour functions as a continuous commentary on the nature of the volunteer work done in the camp throughout the book, persistently reinforced by the patterns that carpet the gutter of *Threads*. Like the production work in the bookending pages, many aspects of the depicted charity labour are a predominantly female domain. Kate's friend Nadine, for example, helps to

[122] Earle, "Politics of Lace," 4-5.
[123] Earle, "Politics of Lace," 5.

build a playground and accompanies the narrator on a shopping trip for supplies.[124] Midwife Jet incessantly works to alleviate the precarious situation of pregnant women and mothers in the Dunkirk camp.[125] The volunteering coordinator overseeing the workforce at the warehouse is also a woman.[126] Sue is in charge of the Good Chance Theatre Dome, the arts space in the camp.[127] In comparison, male work happens mostly in the background, with Kate's husband being the only recurring male character among the volunteers. All these helpers are recognized members of Western societies, and they can ultimately return to safe homes. Notably, this distinction is often immediately visible due to the difference in skin colour. Nonetheless, the book also shows more than one instance where the distinction between those allowed to belong and those rejected tears right through families and communities.[128] Ultimately, the position of the white female volunteers constructed in *Threads* is reminiscent of the lace-workers, entailing both privilege and an enormous socio-economic burden.[129]

Although making lace by hand requires prolonged and meticulous labour, Earle asserts that it is also a technique allowing for "artistic expression."[130] By framing her narrative with lace gutters, Evans also affirms the central role of art in the fight against dehumanization. Earle's exploration of labour in *Threads* maps out a spectrum reaching from male-dominated work (mostly building) that is classified as essential "to non-essential (art) labour," which is female-dominated.[131] The labour of art in the book, however, takes on a central role which Earle's

[124] Evans, *Threads*, 36-49.
[125] Evans, *Threads*, 80, 85-86, 114-115.
[126] Evans, *Threads*, 73-74, 106.
[127] Evans, *Threads*, 33-35, 160-165.
[128] Evans, *Threads*, 14, 16, 25, 43, 51, 113.
[129] This again invokes the court ruling between MSF and the French government which placed the burden of providing food and shelter on continued humanitarian aid, rather than forcing the authorities to step up their effort. See Evans, *Threads*, 41, and my own observations in the previous section.
[130] Earle, "Politics of Lace," 5.
[131] Earle, "Politics of Lace," 15.

hierarchy of importance overlooks. Kate explains that Sue "found something at the Jungle that broke through linguistic and cultural boundaries. Art."[132] In other words, the work of forming an intercultural community that is inclusive of survival migrants begins with art. Evans draws the tent poles in the back of this panel as strips of lace which further highlights that art is an important structural component to social constellations. Art, unlike labour directly related to shelter and subsistence, allows people to reaffirm their humanity to themselves. This is first hinted at when Evans begins to draw portraits of refugees. She meditates "what can I give someone who has very little and is about to lose even that? I can give them a piece of paper with their portrait on."[133] This specific potential of art is re-emphasized when the police raze the camp and a disoriented inhabitant walks into the arts space. Sue helps him by drawing an outline of his hand on a piece of paper, and the narrator comments that "[n]ow, more than ever, he needs to make a mark. To know he still exists."[134] The man's visible condition of shock due to the humiliation and violence he experiences at the hands of state power invokes Agamben's category of bare life. Remarkably, what he strives for in this moment of ultimate deprivation to regain some sense of value for his own existence is an act of artistic creation, however minor. Thus, art is a profoundly human activity, and the assertion of humanity it allows makes it very much essential.

This potential of art is central not only to the individuals living in the camp, it also pertains to the entire narrative project of *Threads*, and Evans demonstrates this in another full-page panel (Fig. 3). While the gutter, a space usually plain white, is filled with a physical product

[132] Evans, *Threads*, 35.
[133] Evans, *Threads*, 75.
[134] Evans, *Threads*, 161.

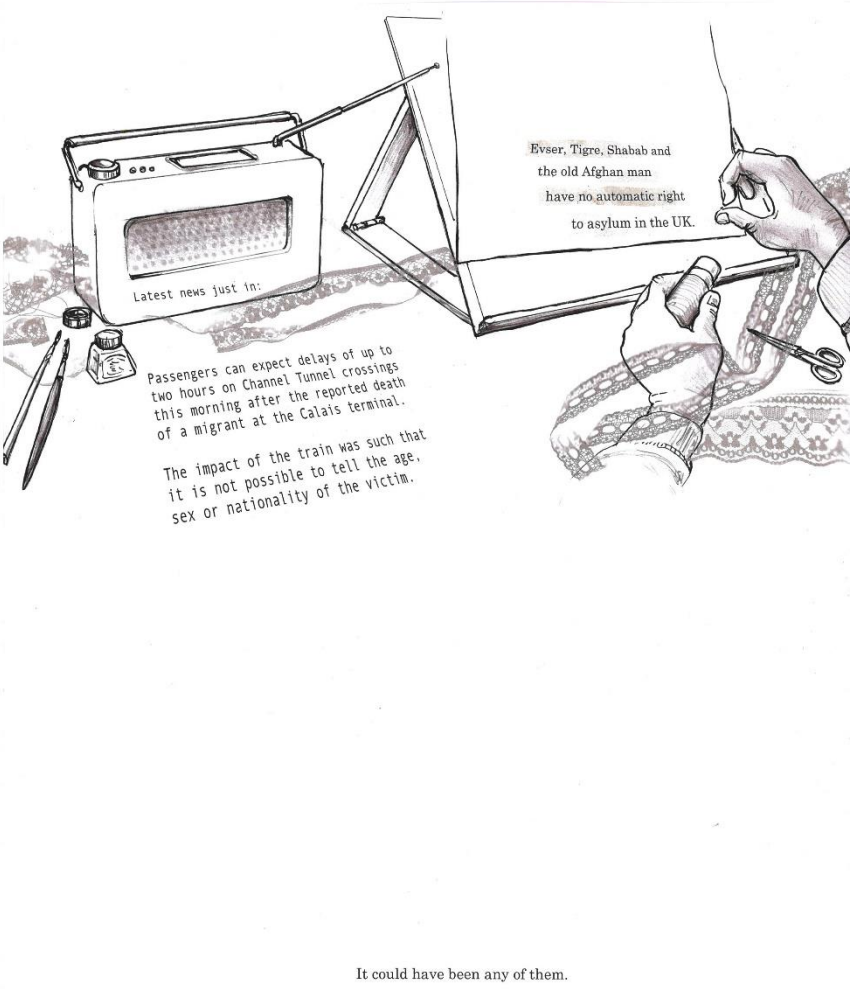

Figure 3 *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis,* page 22 (permission of Verso Books)

of creative expression, there is a single page left almost entirely blank. On top of the page, a radio report provides mere facts regarding delays at the Calais tunnel, right next to Kate's drawing board. Instead of pencils, she uses lace and scissors. The blank paper she works with contains names and references to individuals she met. Notably, the report, which treats refugees as anonymous, is in a distinct typeface, while the comment on the page lying on the board follows the book's usual typographical style. The lace strip that Evans works from for her artistic

recreation originates in the radio.[135] This is a hint at the relationship between documentary truth and Evans' creative renderings. Her story provides a different angle, a perspective that is interested in the individual stories behind circulating news. Furthermore, the scissors imply a restructuring of the factual material that underlies her story. Thus, this page invokes all three techniques of fictionalization theorized by Iser. A selection from the events has to be made, recombined on the page, and by mixing the activities of drawing and working with lace on this page, juxtaposed and contrasted to a news report, Evans also discloses this fictionality to the reader. Through her approach of presenting the camp in a highly allegorical work of art, Evans, like the man after the police invasion, employs art to make the human visible.

The three fictionalization methods also illuminate the narrative mechanisms of the lace allegory and the contribution of this artistic device to the work's documentary project. Evans selects an aspect of local history, lace production, charges it with historical and political significance and uses it to metaphorize the larger political and economic structures which contain refugees in a position of precarity. The artist reconstructs her individual first- and second-hand experiences and combines them on the page with the historically documented past of Calais through the stylistic element of lace. The text, then, comprises a singular narrative woven from these multiple documentary components, disclosing itself as fictionalized through both the surreality of the lace image and its drawn form. The imaginative visual connection between Calais' industrial past and the appearance of unofficial refugee camps is an example of the capability of fictionalized narrative to help us make sense of a world that is very much real. The intersecting threads of lace permeating the text stand for the dialectic force of privilege and oppression which work together in a fabric holding an unjust system in place. None of this

[135] Evans, *Threads*, 22.

suggests that the book itself is a work of fiction. Rather, fictionality is the creative mode by which the text constructs and reinforces its profound critique of an economic and political system, assembling it from separate individual elements which become parts of an interconnected and meaningful narrative whole. Fictionalization, then, is an essential textual factor of the work's response to the hostility that survival migrants are confronted with, as it helps Evans to reveal the systemic injustice she witnessed in the Jungle.

The reading of lace as a dialectic device that I propose, then, shows that refugees are not alien intruders to the global West, but rather an integral element to the overarching and historically grown structure of global capitalism.[136] This parallels Agamben's argument, as he identifies a state of exclusion from human rights security precipitated by the system of nation-states which provides the political framework structuring the globalized modern economy.[137] The lace metaphor, then, is a part of the text's strategy to resist anti-refugee sentiment. As lace replaces the gutter, the story unfolding in *Threads* is literally held in place visually by the incessant output of an industrial Western economy. Moreover, placing artistic emphasis on the gutter frames invokes Butler's description of the frame as subject to "leakage and contamination," the inherent potential of a delineated perspective to imply what it does not show.[138] Evans innovatively works against this possibility, guiding the closure process by means of lace. She shows that the narrative she relates is already contaminated by a political and historical context that literally fills all visible gaps on the pages of *Threads*. In her interpretation of the lace metaphor as catalyst of compassion, Candida Rifkind suggests that "[t]he lace gutters

[136] For examples of scholarly arguments positioning refugees as a consequence of the modern system of nation-states, see note 19.
[137] Candida Rifkind also claims that the image of lace invokes Agamben's conception of bare life because the fabric is woven from "bare threads." See Rifkind, "Detention Comics," 304.
[138] Butler, *Frames*, 9.

produce an […] 'aesthetic technology of belonging' as they at once estrange the familiar textile object and familiarize the estranged migrant subject in a comic that performs its aesthetic constructedness as a visual metaphor for the artificiality of the situation itself."[139] Thus, the ubiquitous lace image in *Threads* shows that the issue of belonging as such is not left in question. The situation in the Jungle is man-made by a system that originates in Calais and everywhere else where capitalist principles guide socio-economic and political progress. As it conveys this causation via the lace imagery, *Threads* urges the reader to notice the level of poverty and suffering exacerbated by police violence and discrimination happening so close to home, and to question the systemic roots of these issues. Yet the book is aware that refugees are met with rejection and hostility not only by policy-makers and police authorities. In fact, much of the political reaction is the consequence of public pressure by citizens who do not share Evans' morals and compassion.[140] The author does acknowledge this by quoting violent, degrading, and dehumanizing comments made online and responding to them. This confrontational approach to pro-refugee comics activism will be the subject of the final section of this chapter.

Countering Digital Expressions of Hatred

In the early pages of *Threads*, Evans depicts a bloody assault scene, in which a few refugees are attacked at night in Calais by a group of white men in police overalls with removed insignia. The episode is rendered in dark tones and enveloped by black lace. The violence of the scene is highlighted by the chromatic contrast between the darkness dominating the panels and the red of the blood.[141] This gruesome anecdote is an apposition to an internet comment which

[139] Rifkind, "Detention Comics," 305.
[140] Polakow-Suranksy, *Go Back*, 132-133.
[141] Evans, *Threads*, 28-31.

suggests that "[t]hese refugees are safe in France where they could claim asylum if they wanted 2 shame they want our benefits 2 much!"[142] The juxtaposition of her experience of life in the Jungle with a hostile social media statement about refugees is a continuous strategy of resistance to anti-immigration sentiment in *Threads*. In this section, I will provide a short discussion of the exacerbation of violence by digital media, before focussing on Evans' stylistic and narrative approaches to this aspect of the text.

The process by which a human life manifests as ungrievable and, therefore, unworthy of mourning and preservation is the cultural framing of said life in mass media.[143] In her analysis of the framing exercised by the US public media throughout the post-9/11 military campaigns, Butler examines images circulating via television and print. These renderings adhere to the bellicose doctrine of the US government which promoted the conflicts in question.[144] Hence, there was a vital institutional influence on the messages conveyed through mass media at the time in order to win public approval of the war effort. With the recent domination of less regulated online platforms, news outlets, and information sources, such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter, political attitudes that are fostered and promoted have become more erratic and dangerous. Social media services allow for a higher degree of interaction between users/consumers and content creators. Furthermore, content can be created and distributed by anyone, regardless of the integrity and accuracy of their sources or lack thereof. In this unregulated digital space so-called filter bubbles and echo chambers form in which narrow and often misinformed images of refugees can circulate without further reflection. Filter bubbles

[142] Evans, *Threads*, 27.
[143] Butler, *Frames*, 1.
[144] Judith Butler, "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear," in *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Justice*, 1-18 (London: Verso, 2004). For an example of how US officials reacted to the surfacing of evidence of torture against POWs, see *Frames of War*, 40.

describe the limited perception of reality due to the algorithmic selection of the content one is presented with, while echo chambers denote the exclusive reflection of one's own opinion in consumed information.[145] Both these phenomena aid the formation of a virtual environment in which refugees can be perpetually framed in reductive and dehumanizing ways without intervention. Thus, digital media allows for the hatred of refugees to flourish.

This potential of social media and the world wide web in general to foster and strengthen hateful attitudes has of course been subject to sociological attention. Steffen Krüger detects a correlation between Facebook activity opposing asylum seeker accommodation in German cities and violent action taken against these refugee homes. He identifies two processes at work in those online communities: on the one hand, there is a condensation of refugee depictions solely centred on criminal activity and conflict with locals, and on the other hand, an increasing and repeated call to action following from these depictions.[146] He concludes that the preconditions for physical violence arise indeed out of these secluded digital spaces in which ideas of xenophobic activism form and "continuously ask to become *actualised*."[147] Thus, violent action against refugees is sparked by dehumanizing rhetoric and images that predefine them as objects deserving of such violence, a process that is accelerated and exacerbated by the digital means of communication it can now employ. By incorporating hateful internet quotes in *Threads*, Evans reacts to their unreflected claims and comments on the credibility of these statements. This counter-response to anti-refugee content is facilitated by both visual and narrative elements.

---

[145] For a detailed exploration of how online media polarizes and fragments public opinion through the algorithmic personalization of internet content, see Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin, 2011). For a comparative exploration of filter bubbles and echo chambers, see Judith Möller, "Filter Bubbles and Digital Echo Chambers," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, eds. Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord (New York: Routledge, 2021), 92-100.
[146] Steffen Krüger, "Violence and the Virtual: Right-wing, Anti-asylum Facebook Pages and the Fomenting of Political Violence," in *Fomenting Political Violence: Fantasy, Language, Media, Action*, eds. Steffen Krüger, Karl Figlio, and Barry Richards (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 77-78.
[147] Krüger, "Violence," 77-78.

Evans' stylistic choices regarding the presentation of the online quotes reinforces her critical stance towards the commentators. The quotes are framed in drawn smartphones against full-page photographs of lace-patterns which are sometimes stylized (Fig. 4). The blank white smartphone screens which show nothing but writing emphasize the anonymity and distance of the speakers. This stands in stark contrast with Kate's narration, which is almost always written across either lace or the panels of the story. The act of drawing is a testament to her witnessing of refugee lives and her participation in the refugee community as charity worker. Nonetheless, the comments are displayed prominently, filling an entire page each. Their lace background, however, infuses this choice with some ambiguity. Since lace fills the gutter of *Threads*, these pages constitute a cross-section of the gutter. The dialectic of lace finds another iteration. The internet is a technology meant to enable connection which is also shown by the narrator's introduction to the first such comment depicted in the book, "[c]onnectivity. Commentary. Follow the threads of conversation wherever they go."[148] Yet, the hostile sentiment they express makes these quotations part of a separation effort. Once again, connection and separation emerge in a dialectic relationship, paralyzing refugees in a position of vulnerability. This reading of the full-page panels as expanded depiction of the gutter invokes McCloud's description of closure, the process by which the reader constructs meaning across multiple panels as "observing the parts but perceiving the whole."[149] I argue that Evans forecloses misperceptions of the "whole"

[148] Evans, *Threads*, 23.
[149] McCloud, *Understanding*, 63.

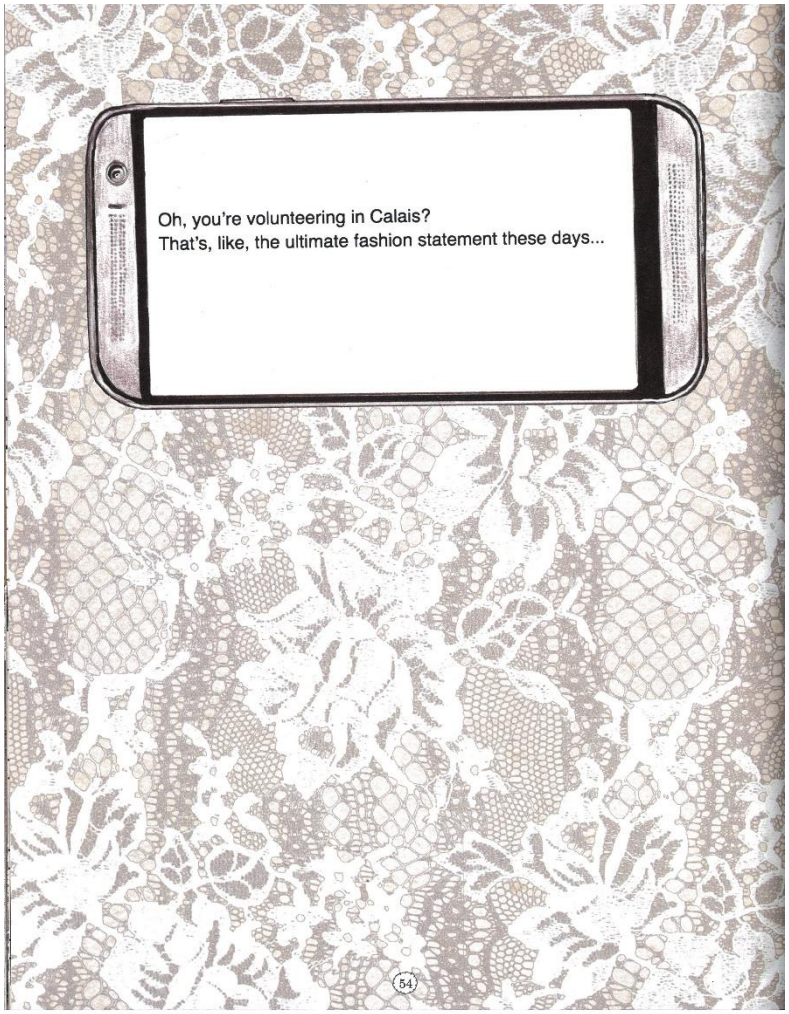

Figure 4 *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis*, page 54 (permission of Verso Books)

that a reader might perceive within her work by enlarging the lace gutter and showcasing therein predictable critiques of the refugee community and the charitable support she promotes.[150]

Towards the end of the text, Evans deviates from the style of earlier depictions of these comments, strengthening the implication that verbal online violence generates physical violence against the refugee community. This is shown by a notable exception to the white background in a particularly forceful comment prior to the police clearing of the camp at the end of the book. A

[150] According to Butler, the framing that is foundational to the dehumanization of refugees depends on persistent reproduction, which makes Evans' use of past comments in lieu of anticipated future responses feasible. See *Frames*, xviii-xix

photograph showing a close-up of flames undergirds the comment "[w]e need to purge this scum with fire theres [*sic*] no other choice."[151] The phone showing this comment is on a flat grey page, rather than a lace background, and it is significantly bigger than the other renderings of online statements, so that the device is cut off by the edge of the full-page panel. These differences highlight that the verbal rejection through online comments is not a removed discussion without effect on the actual refugee community. Instead, their repeated verbalization and call for action, as identified by Krüger's research, can indeed lead to physical violence against survival migrants. Although the action depicted in the final pages of *Threads* is perpetrated by the police, doctor Amin Bagdouche who treated Calais refugees for Médecins du Monde claims that the "dismantlement of part of the camp–and the final destruction–was purely the result of political pressure."[152] By dramatizing a random call for violence from digital media with a burning backdrop and using it to introduce the razing of the camp in the book, Evans proclaims this correlation too. Although the xenophobic utterances she incorporates in the text stem from removed sources which lack Kate's grounding in human interactions, they ultimately materialize the violent expulsion of the Jungle community from the dunes of Calais.

As these comments are embedded in and countered by Kate's narration of genuine experiences in the Jungle, and occasionally by credited research, they form an integral part of Evans' narrative resistance against blatant anti-refugee sentiment. The nocturnal attack scene following a comment on the supposedly safe environment in France is titled "Safe in France," which emphasizes the disparity between the prejudiced comment and the lived reality of the

[151] Evans, *Threads*, 152.
[152] Polakow-Suransky, *Go Back*, 133. Polakow-Suransky also describes in more detail how these "political pressures" in France specifically are expressed in election results and translated into political action.

survival migrants.[153] A comment arguing that "cute refugee babies grow into vile adults who want to destroy our country" is juxtaposed with a page depicting men drawing in the Good Chance Theatre Dome and a game of "invisible cricket," an innocent mock activity meant to alleviate boredom.[154] McCloud's term closure describes the translation of separate visual impulses into a coherent whole, and my reading of the lace background for earlier online comments as enlarged gutter suggests that Evans is effectively attempting to correct misperceptions of the Jungle and to prevent dangerous future misreadings.[155] However, as the real-life consequences of hostile rhetoric unfold, *Threads* becomes increasingly confrontational in its contrasting of these quotations with her first- and second-hand experiences. One powerful contextualization of online commentary with refugee experiences shows a claim that "99% are chancers trying to game the system" next to typewritten paper scraps containing particularly violent episodes of refugee experiences.[156] The descriptions of physical torture, pain, and rape expose the idea of needless economically motivated migration as a weak excuse for rejection that bears no pertinence to the devastating past of oppression and war that forces people into refugeehood. There is also no lace on this double page, but a dark red background, resembling the blood tone used in the early assault scene. This shows that, with increasing progress of the narrative towards the eviction by the riot police in March 2016, the aesthetics of the depicted

[153] Evans, *Threads*, 28. Polakow-Suransky also visited Calais for his research on anti-immigration sentiment, and reports on the topic of refugee safety that "[t]here were rumors that a Syrian child was raped by a local a few days before, and most parents wouldn't allow their kids to leave the camp." See *Go Back*, 130.
[154] Evans, *Threads*, 32-33.
[155] Critics Dragoș Manea and Mihaela Precup have accused Evans of privileging "her own moral position," and thus slipping into a narrative mode that sanctifies refugees as necessarily innocent trauma victims. See "Infantilizing the Refugee: On the Mobilization of Empathy in Kate Evans' *Threads from the Refugee Crisis*," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 35, no. 2 (2020): 481-487. https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2020.1738078. I argue instead that Evans' own agenda as documentary comics activist rather than journalist relies on a narration that promotes a political message informed by personal ethics and subjective experience. Her stylistic choices agree with this intention without the omission of internal violence and sexual crime within the refugee community, which she does mention, albeit less prominently than anti-refugee violence.
[156] Evans, *Threads*, 140-141.

internet quotes are altered. The move away from lace backgrounds signifies a process of reification. The dehumanization of refugees exceeds the marginal frame of the narrative and precipitates violent action against the lives of displaced people.

By continuously exposing the injustice of this tragic dynamic and the falsehood of online commentary on refugees, *Threads* truly becomes a documentary work of comics activism. The work shows the contradictory forces which lock survival migrants in liminal spaces, tensions which leave them exposed to institutional threats, unhindered verbal demonization, and, ultimately, physical violence. Yet they also allow the intervention of humanitarian support and invite empathy. Evans employs the visual potential of the comics form to demonstrate that the exclusion of refugees is part of complex systemic imbalances with a long tradition in local Western history. She also shows that, despite the fact that humanitarian aid is already factored into this system, supporting refugee communities materially and socially is a viable answer. Evans demonstrates that recognizing the profound need for change begins with acknowledging the equal humanity of survival migrants.

3. Truth and Subjectivity:

Journalism and Refugeehood in Sarah Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts*

In the Fall of 2010, artist Sarah Glidden accompanied her friends Sarah Stuteville and Alex Stonehill, co-founders of a journalism collective called the *Seattle Globalist*, on an international trip to the Middle East. The aim of the reporters was to do documentary work on the human consequences of the Iraq War in the region, while Glidden gathered material for a comic book about the workings of journalism. The resulting graphic novel, *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq*, was published by Drawn & Quarterly in 2016. The text depicts the journey of Glidden, Stuteville, and Stonehill from Istanbul to the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq and Damascus.[157] Dan O'Brien, a childhood friend of Stuteville and veteran of the Iraq War, also joins the group for most of the trip. The veteran is looking to get "a fuller perspective on the war," while also producing online content as an assignment for his college degree.[158] Stuteville wants to record Dan's experience and document the impact of his encounters with Iraqi civil society. The text shows a multitude of conversations with survival migrants at each destination of the journey, but special consideration is given to the tragic story of Sam Malkandi, an Iraqi Kurd living in the city of Sulaymaniyah whose narrative Stuteville is particularly keen to record. As she witnesses the approaches of the group to journalistic tasks, Glidden also depicts the actual stories they are researching, which are largely focused on the fallout of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Thereby, *Rolling Blackouts* is at once a book about the subject of journalism as well as about refugees.

[157] Again, I will be referring to the character appearing on the page by the first name, and to the author by her surname. In order to avoid confusion about the character of Sarah Stuteville, I will be referring to her by surname.
[158] Sarah Glidden, *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq* (Montréal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly, 2016), 21.

In this chapter, I propose that there is a link between these two topics, and that the exploration of journalism as method, ethos, and profession strengthens the book's empathetic stance towards the survival migrants encountered by the group. Glidden outlines the pressures faced by the profession of journalism, such as trying to present information that is objective, accurate, and accountable, while also appealing to a paying market and treating the featured people both truthfully and ethically. The first section of this chapter will focus on journalism and documentary as contesting generic frames. I argue that these frames precipitate a tension in the work between the commitment to truthful depiction and the subjective nature of human experience through which past events are necessarily accessed. Glidden shows that the poles of this tension are not mutually exclusive, but important textual forces that support a rendering of survival migrants as precarious human subjects. The second section will then transition to a discussion of the book's specific approach to the refugee stories it contains, and how the work exemplifies the strength of comics journalism to render the intricacies and complexities of refugee biographies.

Genre, Context, and Journalism

The trip begins in Istanbul, from where Sarah, Dan, and the two *Globalist* reporters take the Trans-Asia Express towards the Turkish-Iranian border. As the group sets out on their investigative journey, Sarah begins to explore how journalism works, starting with the definition of what journalism *is*. She addresses this fundamental question to Stuteville who answers "anything that is informative, verifiable, accountable, and independent."[159] On the subsequent

[159] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 26.

page, Sarah problematizes these four key characteristics, dedicating one separate panel to each one:

> Is it informative? Is it trying to inform people about a topic or a time or a person? / Is it verifiable? Is it true and can we find out that it's true? / Is it accountable? Do we know who did it, and if we find out that something was untrue, will they take responsibility for it? / And is it independent? So did the person report this for no reason beyond getting to the truth, or did they do it because they were paid by an interested party?[160]

Through this set of exploratory questions, Glidden interrogates the ramifications of Stuteville's definition. Phrasing them as questions indicates an immediate awareness that each of these cornerstones of journalism demands further negotiation, for example in terms of intentionality (informative), phenomenology (verifiable), practicality (accountable), and political as well as economic circumstances (independent). Thus, Stuteville's definition provides a productive impulse for Glidden's documentary agenda. Sarah follows this up with the thought that journalism is "not a medium and it's not a result and it's not a voice… / It's an expectation."[161]

Expectation is a central element of the relationship between text and reader which defines genre.[162] This warrants an inquiry into the generic constellation of journalism, documentary, and comics. Benjamin Woo claims that this relationship has been undertheorized, as he argues that journalism and documentary are two distinct genres interested in "evidentiary representation."[163] While the former "strives to transmit the real as objectively and transparently as possible," the

---

[160] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 27. As this quotation is taken from four different speech bubbles spread across the same amount of panels, I have used slashes to indicate the beginning of a new panel, and I will continue to do so in the following.
[161] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 27.
[162] John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 102.
[163] Benjamin Woo, "Reconsidering Comics Journalism: Information and Experience in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*," in *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*, ed. Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2010), 171.

latter entails "the communication of experience [which] is based on a model of intersubjective understanding."[164] Sarah's early grappling with the nature of journalism in *Rolling Blackouts* troubles this categorization. Stuteville thinks of herself as journalist, and the *Seattle Globalist* works as a collective of journalists. Yet, in Woo's framework, their approach to the task would rather fall into the category of documentary, due to its investment in subjective personal stories and its absence of a strict quasi-scientific methodology to achieve maximum objectivity. Triangulating documentary and journalism with comics journalism, Woo places the latter closer to documentary and asserts that it is not informative, because its primary objective is not to "relay information *per se*," but rather the narration of individual stories.[165] Here, further friction arises between the critic's classification and *Rolling Blackouts*. Although the information entailed in the book does not have the urgency of daily news reports and is focalized through personal experience, Glidden does inform the reader about certain aspects of journalistic fieldwork, as well as the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan and the circumstances of survival migrants on the Iraqi-Turkish border, in Sulaymaniyah, and Damascus.

My discussion of the contrast between Woo's scholarly notion and reporter Stuteville's professional philosophy of journalism implies that the concrete audience expectations of journalistic pieces might be just as varied. This muliplicity of expectations poses a significant problem for journalism specifically as a genre of nonfiction, since, according to Woo, "nonfiction genres rely on regimes of *authenticity* rather than verisimilitude."[166] John Frow echoes this argument, contending that "genres create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood."[167] The recognition

[164] Woo, "Reconsidering," 172.
[165] Woo, "Reconsidering," 176.
[166] Woo, "Reconsidering," 168-169 (original emphasis).
[167] Frow, *Genre*, 2.

of journalism as such is an important prerequisite for its narratives to contribute to the reader's perception of a world removed from their direct and immediate experience. Stuteville meditates on this intention at multiple points throughout the book. She summarizes her general approach to journalism as "based on the idea that if people are exposed to more ideas and information, then they'll allow themselves to question things that they assumed were right."[168] During the trip to the Middle-East, she wants to offer new angles on the Iraq War, focusing especially on displaced populations and changes in the region after the conflict. If her stories fail to adhere to the regimes of authenticity conventionally recognized by her audience, they cannot spark the kind of rethinking she wants to encourage. Generic frames become potentially helpful devices to promote authorial agendas and to represent authoritative information. However, if these frames fail to correspond to readerly expectations, they can also foreclose audience engagement with the subject matter.

The relationship between intention and generic convention is closely related to two paradigms of journalism which are central to its acceptance as truth by the audience: objectivity and balance. In relation to comics journalism specifically, Joe Sacco addresses both these paradigms. Objectivity he criticizes as an excuse for indifference towards the depicted subject which might be shown while suffering.[169] Balance he sees as "a smokescreen for laziness" because it negates the important subjective standpoint of the journalist themselves.[170] This rejection of the classic journalistic ideals of objectivity and balance is mirrored by Johannes Schmid's reading of Glidden. He claims that by virtue of being a documentary work, *Rolling*

[168] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 241.
[169] Sacco, *Journalism*, xi.
[170] Sacco, *Journalism*, xii.

Blackouts emphasizes "personal involvement and a certain activist stance."[171] The underlying sentiment is not that documentary descends into the realm of opinion, rather it shows that true events are always seen from an individual perspective. Glidden's work showcases this in her introductory note, where she asserts that "true objectivity is impossible in narrative journalism (and arguably any kind of journalism)." She emphasizes that narrative is an important mechanism by which "all of us try to make sense of this chaotic world," and that any new rendering of an event reorganizes the related details.[172] This defense of storytelling as documentary mode invokes Iser's fictionalization methods of selection, recombination, and disclosure, although the primary purpose of Glidden's note is to emphasize the "real dialogue" and "true events" that underpin her narrative. Comics scholar Jeff Adams describes the relationship between documentary narrative and fiction as follows: "documentary is arguably dependent on fictional narrative structures; it is the historical familiarity with the conventions of fiction that makes documentary intelligible."[173] This shows again that fictionalization is not synonymous with the transition of a story from truth into fiction. Instead, it is the narrative process by which a subject becomes comprehensible in a text.

Glidden and Sacco both point out that a paradigm of true objectivity misses the actual important quality of truthful or accurate narration. Glidden signals that she wants to be held accountable for the accuracy of *Rolling Blackouts* in the introductory note. While Sacco embraces the subjective element of narrative journalism in the form of comics, Glidden

[171] Johannes Schmid, "Comics as Memoir and Documentary: A Case Study of Sarah Glidden," in *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage*, eds. Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 319. Schmid places documentary comics as a sub-genre of comics journalism, as opposed to Woo, who sees comics journalism in its entirety as a documentary practice and calls the term "comics journalism" itself "misleading." See Woo, "Reconsidering," 176.
[172] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 6.
[173] Jeff Adams, *Documentary Graphic Novels and Social Realism* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 55.

expresses her "discomfort" about the use of narrative.[174] Schmid claims that the opening note is a paratextual element that "primes generic expectations, but also explains, justifies, and promotes the mode of reception favoured by the author."[175] The unease expressed in the introduction illuminates Glidden's aesthetic choices, which reflect the documentary ambitions of the text and her discomfort towards the necessity of storytelling. To do her framing of the book as a documentary work justice, the artist employs a simple style which makes minimal use of the visual potential of comics (Fig. 5). The vast majority of pages follow the same structure of three

Figure 5 *Rolling Blackouts*, page 7 (copyright Sarah Glidden, permission of Drawn & Quarterly)

[174] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 6.
[175] Schmid, "Comics as Memoir," 320.

lines of panels, with two to three panels per line. Onomatopoeia, commonly used to describe ambient noise in comics, is almost entirely absent, and thought bubbles are scarce, plain, and only used for Sarah herself. The visual appearance of the work shows that the initial framing of *Rolling Blackouts* as work of journalistic aspiration was not sufficient to establish its documentary function for Glidden. Instead, the style perpetually reinforces the generic ambition of the text through a simplistic aesthetic. Furthermore, the narration itself focuses strongly on dialogue, rather than elaborate visualization of the stories that are being told. The emphasis on the witnessed conversations, as well as Glidden's appearance as a character in her own work, remind the reader that she relates individual positions and personal experiences.[176] Hence, there is a duality of, on the one hand, anxiety about storytelling as documentary narrative mode, and, on the other, plain aesthetics emphasizing minimal authorial interference with the depicted subjective perspectives. I argue that this double-edged representational approach is a strength of the work, because it highlights that a focus on subjective experience is not synonymous with reduction. It is rather a layering of additional true perspectives. Glidden discloses the multiplicity of truth and offers fresh viewpoints on the consequences of the Iraq War without necessarily contesting previous narratives in terms of factual accuracy.

The dependence of truth on authentic subjective experience pulls into focus the importance of context. The conversation between Sarah, Stuteville, and American photojournalist Sebastian Meyer during a cockfight in Sulaymaniyah expresses this most explicitly. Sebastian speaks about his experiences as an embedded journalist in Afghanistan,

[176] Jeff Adams argues that the appearance of journalists as characters in their own documentary works is an autobiographical device employed "to privilege narrative authenticity and to certify documentary truth, as they perceived it. … [S]ubject matter is explored in a broad political and historical context, but there is no assumption that the authors are politically neutral, or that they present an objective documentary of events." Thus, he sees authenticity and objectivity as mutually exclusive. Adams, *Documentary*, 11.

accompanying soldiers into military action. This kind of reporting requires a close relationship with the soldiers and Meyer indicates that, once the army men became comfortable around him, he heard them make unbelievable statements. Stuteville asks if he would rather censor himself than to present his "buddies … in a bad light."[177] Sebastian counters that "[i]f you're a good journalist with good ethics, you give it context. If taken out of context it would be incorrect, then you don't tell it. / I wouldn't call that self-censoring, I'd call it good journalism."[178] He follows this up with a concrete example, where he cheered on a sniper who bragged about a confirmed kill. Sebastian explains that the "guy he shot was shooting at us and outflanking us and three of his buddies almost killed me. / So I was like 'Yaaay.'"[179] In this case, Sebastian's legitimate fear of losing his own life in combat is crucial to understand the situation without passing moral judgement on him or the sniper for the act of killing and rejoicing.

Of course, the larger geopolitical event of the Iraq War and its consequences on the civilian population of the region is much more complex than this specific singular occurrence described by Sebastian. There are an infinite number of contextual layers to the Iraq War. It is part of Stuteville's project, and by extension Glidden's as well, to unearth new truths about the war by engaging a variety of personal experiences. Remarkably, these include not only survival migrants, but also the returning marine Dan. Despite claiming early on that "[a] good journalist doesn't go into a story already knowing the conclusion," Stuteville does admit, after a long series of interviews with Dan, that she did anticipate an outcome.[180] She envisioned that the former marine would be emotionally impacted by the encounter with displaced Iraqi Arabs, and would

[177] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 138.
[178] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 139.
[179] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 140.
[180] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 88.

ultimately develop a revised judgement on the US war effort.[181] Instead of fulfilling these expectations, Dan mostly maintains his positive attitude towards his military memories, which appear in his narrations more like an enjoyable and friendly field trip rather than an invasion.[182] After meeting Arab refugees in the house of a former Iraqi Colonel, Dan confides in Sarah that he does indeed begin to question America's methods of intervention, albeit without admitting that foreign interference in general might be questionable in the first place. In her own narrative voice, Sarah comments that "[m]aybe Dan didn't come here to tell his story … Maybe he came here because he wanted to hear something. / Something that no one here is going to tell him."[183] Glidden insinuates that Dan was seeking external confirmation that the US invasion was ultimately a positive decision. His fruitless efforts to connect with locals about his war experience throughout the journey show that not even the Kurdish people in Northern Iraq are willing to confirm this notion, despite the improvement to their circumstances since the fall of Saddam Hussein.[184] As Dan's own expectations are disappointed, he defies those of Stuteville.

The *Seattle Globalist* aims to offer the American public an angle on the Iraq war which has been underrepresented in mainstream media, one which emphasizes the detrimental impact of the war on some of the civilian population of the invaded territory.[185] This is supposed to provide an anchor for revision and a critical re-evaluation of the war. Yet, on the final pages, Stuteville concedes "that creating change can't be the goal of the journalist. … The best we can

---

[181] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 239-240.
[182] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 36-37. Although in *Rolling Blackouts*, Dan attempts to appear as the antithesis to the stereotype of the PTSD-ridden veteran, Stuteville does point out the emotional impact of his war memories on Dan in the reportage she wrote based on the interviews depicted in the comic. See Sarah Stuteville, "Seattle Marine revisits Iraq; mission accomplished, not over," *Seattle Times*, May 31, 2011, https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/seattle-marine-revisits-iraq-mission-accomplished-not-over/. For a hint at this in Glidden's book, see *Rolling Blackouts*, 101-102.
[183] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 254.
[184] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 104.
[185] This ambition of the *Seattle Globalist* collective corresponds to the lack of representation of Iraqi war victims pointed out by Judith Butler, see *Frames*, 39-40.

hope for is that the story gets passed along. The way the reader uses that story to understand the world is up to them."[186] Successful documentary works offer new contexts for events, but, like newsroom journalism, they cannot foreclose reader responses that deviate from, or even straight-up counter the journalist's intentions. The book constructs a potent vision of the irreducible damage done to the civilian population of Iraq. This is achieved through a combination of persistent emphasis on the truthful depiction of events and the double focalization via Sarah in the first instance, and the subjects she encounters in the second. *Rolling Blackouts* thus bears witness to the fact that displacement and suffering of Iraqi civilians are integral to the Iraq War, and the act of narration within a generic frame that employs characteristics of both documentary and journalism enables the audience to bear witness too. The narrative strategies which underpin the approaches of Stuteville and Glidden to refugee narratives in particular will be the focus of the following section.

Narrating Refugees in Comics Journalism

In her initial exploration of the term "journalism," Glidden brings up the question of whether reporterly work is independent of external forces.[187] My previous discussion of genre expectations already shows that anticipated audience preconceptions influence how documentary narrative manifests. Throughout *Rolling Blackouts*, Glidden addresses two additional factors, besides considerations of audience expectations and genre, namely the demands of a commercial market in which the work is sold, and the consumption habits of its contemporary readership. This section analyzes the impact of these two closely related external influences on the ways in which the *Globalist* reporters engage the refugee subjects they encounter.

[186] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 298.
[187] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 27.

Financial and marketing considerations have to be balanced out with ethical aspects of journalism if a work is to successfully reach its audience. The moral implications of documentary work, specifically in the case of comics, are highlighted by Sacco's criticism of the two columns of American journalism, balance and objectivity. He contends that "journalists are not flies on the wall that are neither seen nor heard."[188] In other words, the presence of the reporter does have an impact on how events unfold in front of their eyes. Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of showing in a narrative piece not only what people at the heart of the story "said they saw," but also "what I [the journalist] saw for myself."[189] Finally, Sacco goes on to explain that his choices of what to render already reveal sympathies and make a political statement. *Rolling Blackouts* shows how these ethical ramifications are negotiated in practice against the reality of market logic and habits of information consumption. This topic is introduced during the first stage of the trip on the Trans-Asia express to the Turkish-Iraqi border. Alex and Stuteville are collecting ideas on stories they could produce during their journey, and the latter gets frustrated, asking "[h]ow can we write something new? / It's like we have this really complicated issue here, and we have to figure out what we have access to, what we have an outlet for… all in a few days."[190] Hence, the process of subject selection is not only guided by the interest in perspectives of the powerless for the sake of giving them a voice, as Sacco suggests.[191] The ambition to tell stories that are new to the audience and have the potential to attract outlets trying to generate monetary profit also matters. Stuteville admits that these worries are not merely practical, but that they pertain to her "trying to figure out what kind of journalist I

[188] Sacco, *Journalism*, xi.
[189] Sacco, *Journalism*, xii.
[190] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 47.
[191] Sacco, *Journalism*, xii.

am."[192] The reporter conducts journalistic work in relation to ethical, practical, and financial concerns and, as these considerations pull projects in different directions, journalistic choices become an act of mediation between them.

These pressures are contextualized with survival migration when the group meets the Iranian couple Amin and Mina in Van, Turkey. Amin is a blogger who had been imprisoned in Iran for publishing illegal books. When leaving prison on bail for medical treatment, he decided to leave the country. Together with his partner Mina, he fled to Turkey with the help of smugglers. At the time of the interview, the couple has already waited for years to be approved for resettlement in the US.[193] Sarah's narrative voice comments "[t]he more Sarah [Stuteville] talks with Amin and Mina, the more I'm convinced their story would make a great article."[194] Yet, once the conversation is over, the group discusses how Amin's story might be published. Despite Sarah's enthusiasm during the interview scene, Stuteville and Alex identify a lack of potential outlets for the piece on its own.[195] They concede the importance of efficient marketing, because people spend a very limited amount of time informing themselves on issues outside their personal sphere.[196] A story needs to attract its audience enough to make them choose it over competing stories on offer, thereby achieving financial success.

In order to tell documentary stories that do well on the paying market, the *Globalist* reporters adapt a specific narrative strategy. Their approach is to focus on similarities between the audience and the subjects whose personal experiences are being narrated in a piece. For Amin and Mina, this is already alluded to during the interview itself. The couple brought their

[192] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 48.
[193] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 60-63.
[194] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 63.
[195] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 66.
[196] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 66.

little dog Happy on the dangerous journey across the border. When Stuteville learns that Happy crossed mountainous border territory with them, she comments "[n]ow that's a story Americans could understand... smuggling your dog across the border because you love him so much."[197]

Another example is the group of exiled Iraqi Arabs the journalists encounter during their stay in Syria. Afterwards, they conclude that the aspirations of these survival migrants mirror those of middle-class Americans, and that they are mostly "very well-educated, not particularly religious people" with a rather low level of political involvement.[198] After meeting the Iranians in Van, Stuteville explains a key reality of competitive publishing: "people are looking for things they can already relate to."[199] In the case of Amin and Mina, Alex suggests that they pair the story with that of a lesbian rapper, also an Iranian refugee, because "everybody always gravitates to sexual minorities" when it comes to identification with the narrated subjects.[200] The combination of "relatable" refugee stories in order to create a bigger picture of the overarching displacement crisis is one strategy to appeal to readership without compromising content. Stuteville sums up that journalists are "part of a bigger system and they realize that part of caring about what they do is making sure it gets paid attention to."[201] This comment highlights that a careful response to market demands and consumer interest are not an obstacle to, but an integral part of a journalist's moral responsibility when telling the stories of survival migrants. By emphasizing similarities between the American target audience and the refugee community, the activist position of the *Globalist* reporters, and Glidden herself, becomes apparent, namely a stance of empathy and compassion for refugees.

[197] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 63.
[198] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 269.
[199] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 67.
[200] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 67.
[201] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 67.

Documentary narration at once focalized through the reporter and the reported allows for an engagement with complex life stories of war, displacement, and refugeehood. Furthermore, this technique highlights the contradiction and empirical imperfection of these stories without descending into suspicion. Rather than attempting to unearth an undeniable singular truth based on facts, Glidden depicts her personal exploration of her subjects, which is of course mediated by their own flawed memory. Nevertheless stories, as Glidden points out in her introductory note, are the only way we can access our own past. I argue that comics journalism illuminates the narrative of its subjects broadly by contextualizing first- and second-hand experiences. One prominent example of this is the enigmatic and incoherent appearance of Dan. Another instance is the character of Sam Malkandi. Sam is an Iraqi Kurd who fled to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, escaping coercion into military service. Eventually, his wife committed suicide in exile, leaving Sam with their daughter. They moved on to Pakistan where they registered with the UNHCR as refugees. In a camp, Sam met his second wife. They had a second child and got approved for settlement in the US in the late 90s. Because he helped a stranger at the mall with a seemingly innocent administrative task, Sam's name appeared in the 9/11 Commission Report. After five years of detention, Sam was deported to Iraq due to inconsistencies between his refugee backstory and his application for American citizenship.[202] The context provided in *Rolling Blackouts*, via Sarah's slow and lengthy encounter with Sam's biography through his interviews, her reading of documents, and her private conversations with Stuteville, give access to a nuanced rendering of Sam and his tragic situation.

The contradictions in Sam's story and narrative are numerous. For one, he is a Kurd by birth and still has family in Sulaymaniyah, yet he appears to the travellers in many ways like an

[202] For Sam's story in the book, see Glidden, *Rolling Blackouts*, 105-107.

American in exile. After their move to Seattle, the story of Sam's family appears as "the refugee American dream we love to hear about."[203] Despite being deported from the US, he exhibits an unbroken enthusiasm for the American lifestyle, hoarding US groceries and bragging about his son playing American football.[204] Furthermore, he admits that he misrepresented himself as a member of a persecuted political party when applying for refugee status with the UNHCR in Pakistan, and he tries to justify that lie as a mere fib.[205] The 9/11 Commission Report reveals that he actually provided a far more dramatic narrative of himself as leader of an underground cell and of being accused of communism.[206] Although he was aware of his lies, he indicated on his application for US citizenship in 2003 that he was never part of a political party, which eventually prepared the ground for his deportation order. Paradoxically, he contends that he "wanted to be honest" on the citizenship form.[207] Also, he agreed to help a stranger obtain a medical visa for a friend, without questioning their intentions. Being stuck in Sulaymaniyah for a considerable amount of time, he still showcases impressive optimism regarding a reunion with his family, a notion that is not shared by Stuteville, who claims in a separate conversation that "[h]e's not ever going back."[208] Employing the comics medium allows Glidden to portray Sam as a multifaceted personality with an elusive contradictory past. Here, the complexity aids realistic depiction. Life stories turn into narratives so they can be comprehended retrospectively, but this process, as Glidden points out in the book's opening, depends on persistent and varying reiteration. In this sense, Sam's image is more believable due to his inconsistencies, because this instability is the nature of subjective experience through which narrative discloses truth.

[203] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 106.
[204] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 112, 115.
[205] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 162.
[206] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 168.
[207] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 163.
[208] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 118.

Sam's story also speaks in powerful ways to the ability of comics journalism to engage with personal histories of survival migration. He is at the same time an Iraqi Kurd, an American dad, a refugee, a widower, and a victim of deportation policies. Thus, he perfectly embodies the kind of similarity between audience and subject that Alex and Stuteville are looking for, while also having a remarkable story. At once, he is a refugee who lived in encampments for a decade and also a successful example of integration into American society. Yet he defies these archetypal images by being displaced from the US itself. Sam's narrative reflects on categories of displacement and opens the question whether his eviction from the US does render him just as much a refugee as Saddam's forceful conscription policies. Sarah identifies that "[i]n the end, it doesn't really matter whether or not Sam was telling us the truth. … [T]he chance for anyone to know what actually happened was lost when … the government cut corners to get rid of him. That's the only story that's ours to tell now. The rest will stay here with him."[209] Sam's story is exemplary for the complex and contradictory biographies refugeehood is prone to produce and shows how such life trajectories are often obscured by trauma, memory, and violence. *Rolling Blackouts* shows that comics journalism is a potent tool to present these stories through subjective experiences, without eschewing the individual moral standpoint of the reporter themselves, nor the methodological and material circumstances that impact the narration.

The impossibility of reporting ethically on displacement in a disconnected, purely fact-centred way is disclosed after the group visits a community of refugees outside Sulaymaniyah, living in a camp for internally displaced people. Kamran, Sebastian's colleague at the Iraqi photography agency, decides to buy a heater for a man who complains about the nocturnal cold in the camp. This gesture seemingly contradicts the ethical rule to not help subjects in order to

[209] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 191.

prevent false hopes. Kamran counters, "I totally agree that you shouldn't give your subject stuff. But sometimes they need help."[210] Journalistic ethos is confronted with questions of personal morality, and Kamran's decision shows that no professional philosophy can alleviate ethical pressures arising from situations such as refugee encounters. Ultimately, his choice to help makes him no less of a professional media representative, but it does show his empathy as a person. By documenting not only the interaction of Kamran and the camp inhabitants, but also her personal experience of it, Glidden is able to authentically highlight the contradiction between theory and journalistic practice. In her narrative voice, Sarah poses some pertinent questions after the episode: "[i]s it even possible to report on a person's life without intervening in it? … What is journalistic distance? … How much does it even matter?"[211] These rhetorical questions exemplify the strength of Sacco's approach, employed by Glidden, to feature as a character in her own investigative work. Her personal perspective enables her to point out contradictions and dilemmas as she encounters them, emphasizing truth as subjective experience, rather than an objective script underlying events.[212]

Rolling Blackouts opens with an even more forceful episode that reveals the distinct characteristics of the refugee encounter. A woman who cannot quite articulate herself in the English language addresses Stuteville with a series of contradictory and confusing statements. She at once embraces the conversation, but also tells the reporter "I never liked you." She voices her critical opinion of the American government but also "EVERYBODY," and as she agrees to

[210] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 211.
[211] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 211.
[212] My argument regarding comics journalism and the subject of refugeehood is developed specifically in relationship to Sacco's methodology of rendering himself as character on the page. Some successful works of comics journalism, however, function without this device. See, for example, Jake Halpern and Michael Sloan, *Welcome to the New World* (New York: Metropolitan, 2020). Notably, Halpern decided to append his Pulitzer-Prize winning book with lengthy explanations about his methods to ensure the reader that his narrative is accurate.

talk with the interviewer about her story, she pleads "[p]lease. Understand me, okay?"[213] Remarkably, this encounter is closed with the central thematic question of the book posed in Sarah's narrative voice: "What is journalism?" Glidden's choice to derive that question from this particular conversation suggests a specific dynamic between the subject of refugeehood and journalistic work. At the end of the book, this proleptic episode is rendered in depth. The woman is queuing for rations and money at a distribution centre outside of Damascus.[214] This bimonthly ritual is a moment that exposes the fundamental helplessness of refugees and shows that once people are forced into survival migration, they become dependent on external support and remain highly vulnerable. The opening page, then, shows that the subject of refugeehood defies notions of detached objectivity, because of the dire need for support and the immanent human suffering at stake in every given moment. Refugee crises create an overwhelming moral imperative for compassionate action. Thus, as the woman begs "[u]nderstand me," she addresses not only Stuteville, but also her and Glidden's audiences. *Rolling Blackouts* renegotiates the paradigms of objectivity and balance in journalism against the personal connection between reporter and subject on which journalistic work depends. In the end, it is the task of journalism to make the tangible precariousness of its subjects accessible to the audience, not to merely inform them that someone is suffering. This is what accurate narration of refugee stories truly demands. Comics journalism in the tradition of Sacco is a particularly powerful form to achieve this, because it acknowledges the human relationship of witnessing reporter with the survival migrants. If such journalism navigates the pressures of reader habits, market demands, and genre expectations successfully, the audience should recognize their human relationship with survival migrants, too.

[213] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 7 (capitalization in the original). The page is included above as Fig. 5.
[214] Glidden, *Blackouts*, 282-288.

4. Real Stories and Stories About Reality: The Representation of Survival Migrants in Julio Anta's and Anna Wieszczyk's *Home* and Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*

Graphic narratives engaging the subjects of refugeehood and migration belong to a diverse range of genres. The comics examined in the previous chapters are documentary works employing journalistic and autobiographical approaches to storytelling which affiliate them with genres of nonfiction. I have argued that fictionalization in these texts is a mode of narrative structuring which translates subjective experiences of both survival migrants and the artists themselves into a legible textual unit. By using this technique to tell refugee stories, Evans and Glidden counter negative images of refugees. Yet the contribution of comics to the resistance against anti-refugee sentiment is not limited to texts narrating the experiences of real people encountering refugees or undergoing survival migration themselves. Thus, this final chapter transitions towards a discussion of fictional comics incorporating tropes of refugeehood.

The first section focuses on Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, initially published in 2006 by Hachette Australia. Set in a strange fantasy world, *The Arrival* shows the migration of a nameless protagonist from his family home to a big foreign city full of flying objects, weird animals, and outlandish architecture. Although the particular threat that motivates his escape is never explicitly rendered, the book repeatedly emphasizes the traumatic nature of the crisis. The protagonist also meets various other immigrants who relate their own personal experiences of displacement. Without access to the local language of his destination, the man has to navigate the vast and unfamiliar space of the city, immigration bureaucracy, as well as housing and labour markets. After one year, he is eventually joined by his wife and daughter. The girl then helps

other immigrants, having now become a local herself. I contend that *The Arrival* is a text concerned with refugee movement qua migration, and uses estrangement as an artistic technique to frame migration as a universal human experience.

The second section examines *Home* by Columbian-American writer Julio Anta and Polish artist Anna Wieszczyk. *Home*, initially published in five installments in early 2021 and collected in a single volume by Image Comics later the same year, brings together the motif of refugeehood with the most commercially successful genre of the form: superhero comics. The work tells the story of Juan, a little boy from Guatemala who enters the US via the Mexican border during the first days of the Trump administration. While his mother is quickly deported, Juan is moved to a detention facility where he is put in solitary confinement for bringing food to his cell. When a warden verbally abuses him, Juan unlocks his superpowers, allowing him to blow up the prison walls and run away from his captors. He eventually unites with his aunt Gladys who already lives in America. It turns out both Gladys and her children possess superpowers of their own, as did her late brother, Juan's father. An archetypal superhero narrative unfolds around a set of Latin American protagonists defending themselves and their community against the villainous Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), an executive unit of US Homeland Security in charge of persecuting so-called illegal immigrants. By claiming the superhero genre for their empowering migrant narrative, Anta and Wieszczyk make a forceful stand against the humiliating and dehumanizing policies of the early Trump era. Rooting their story of a migrant family of superheroes in this specific recent historical moment shows that comics can inhabit an activist stance against xenophobic attitudes and racist policies in the form of fiction as well.

Art and Defamiliarization in *The Arrival*

In her brief observations on migration as integral element of human history, Jaqueline Bhabha writes that "across a broad canvas of time and space … the factors affecting human mobility have been remarkably constant over centuries (indeed, over millennia)."[215] She thereby suggests that the experience of migration is a stable element common to all human cultures. Reminiscent of this position, Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* treats the subject of migratory movement precisely in terms of universal "problems faced by all migrants, regardless of nationality and destination: grappling with language difficulties, home-sickness, poverty, a loss of social status and recognisable qualifications, not to mention the separation from family."[216] In this section, I propose that Tan visually estranges and thereby generalizes a historically inspired immigration story to achieve an affective response of empathy that reflects on real migrants and calls for their positive reception by host societies.

Despite its focus on the struggles of settlement within a foreign culture signified by the title *The Arrival*, the book contains strong references to survival migration. The text shows the motivation of various characters to come to the city the book is set in, and I contend that these backstories are archetypal refugee narratives. The first such story is the departure of the protagonist himself. As he is walking towards the train station with his family, there are shadows lurking all over the city which have been described by critics as "spiked tentacles" or a "dragon's

[215] Jaqueline Bhabha, *Migrant Crisis*, 3.
[216] Shaun Tan, "The Arrival," accessed February 6, 2022, https://www.shauntan.net/arrival-book.

Figure 6 *The Arrival*, chap. 1 (permission of Hachette Australia)

tail" (Fig 6).[217] Although the specific reason for leaving remains nondescript throughout the book, the dark and threatening appearance clearly signifies menace.[218] This notion is reinforced later by the protagonist's panic over the tails of a pet in his destination city which reminds him of the shadows that drove him out of his home. To explain his fearful reaction to the father of the boy who owns the animal in question, he draws a simplified image of the shadow in his notebook to tell his story. The father answers with his personal story, beginning with a gruesome image of giants literally vacuuming people off the streets of a burning city. This powerful fantastical

[217] Thierry Groensteen, "The Arrival (2006)," in *The Expanding Art of Comics: Ten Modern Masterpieces* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2017), 140; Susanne Abou Ghaida, "The Arrival. by Shaun Tan," *Migration Studies* 9, no. 2 (2021): 318, https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnab011.
[218] Shaun Tan, *The Arrival* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007), chap. 1.

image of horror implies ethnic cleansing, genocide, and holocaust.[219] There are two other migrant stories in the book: a girl forced away from education into labour, running away clenching a book, and an old war veteran leaving his destroyed home.[220] Thus, the quartet of narratives showing individual motivations to emmigrate is exclusively comprised of tales of survival migration. All four migrants are exposed to a lack of human rights security, signified by destruction, imminent danger to be killed, forced labour, and the more vague threat targeted at the protagonist and his family. *The Arrival*, therefore, links the depiction of confusing and difficult immigration experiences that make up most of the book to refugeehood in particular. Of course, this does not mean that every migrant coming to the fictive city of the book must be a survival migrant. Instead, the book stresses that refugees harbour the potential for successful integration and contribution just as much as non-refugee immigrants, while also highlighting the ubiquity and variety of displacement.

For Thierry Groensteen, the indeterminacy of the protagonist's reason to migrate initiates the book's treatment of migration as a general human experience. He writes that "[b]y keeping the motivation of his central character vague, Tan gives his story a universal dimension: it stands for all the others."[221] Moreover, Groensteen contends that the protagonist embodies this universality through his physical appearance, as "[t]here are no names … There are no mustaches or glasses, no distinctive features. With his suit, his trilby, and his suitcase, he is an everyman. The man with no qualities, with whom anyone can identify. … Tan has given the man his own, not especially ethnically stereotyped, physiognomy."[222] The idea that "anyone can

[219] Tan, *The Arrival*, chap. 3.
[220] Tan, *The Arrival*, chap. 3, chap. 4.
[221] Groensteen, "The Arrival (2006)," 140.
[222] Groensteen, "The Arrival (2006)," 131-132. Groensteen also emphasizes that the protagonist becomes a likeable character that is more than "just a cipher" through the talent for origami and "the delight in playing jokes" which he displays.

identify" with the fictional main character of *The Arrival* is crucial to the work's efficacy as a fictional text promoting empathy towards real migrants outside the world of the text.[223] While nonfictional works about refugees, such as Evans' and Glidden's, function in an observational register, fictional works, such as Tan's graphic novel, operate in an archetypal register. Hence, the former show events that actually happened and explores how they were experienced by those involved, while the latter are interested in showing what a certain experience would feel like for the reader by example of the characters on the page.

Tan achieves such readerly self-recognition by following the protagonist through a set of mundane activities which turn into challenges due to the unfamiliar environment. One central aesthetic choice that crucially showcases this interplay between the familiar and its unknown context is the absence of written words apart from the book's title. This absence disorients the reader and forces them to make a conscious decision of how much time to spend on each panel, rather than being able to "leap from speech balloon to speech balloon and glide rapidly over wordless panels, which are thought to be low in information content and instantly intelligible."[224] Tan himself comments that "[i]n *The Arrival*, the absence of any written description also plants the reader more firmly in the shoes of an immigrant character."[225] In other words, the reader shares with the main character the inability to understand locals in the city. This creates confusion for protagonist and audience, and it forces adaptive responses from both. The reader has to reconsider their pace and must switch from the habitual activity of reading script to reading images as "[t]here is no guidance as to how the images might be interpreted, and we

[223] The choice of a universal migrant figure that is a male protagonist who can be read as white has sparked some critical debate, see Rüdiger Singer, "Cute monsters and early birds: foreignness in graphic novels on migration by Shaun Tan and Paula Bulling," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 11, no. 1 (2020): 81, https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2019.1624270.
[224] Groensteen, "The Arrival (2006)," 133.
[225] Tan, "The Arrival."

must ourselves search for meaning and seek familiarity in a world where such things are either scarce or concealed."[226] Likewise, the protagonist uses drawings in his notebook to make himself understood, also exchanging verbal language for iconic messages. He uses this method to express with simple images that he is looking for shelter and food.[227] Notably, the basic needs he seeks to satisfy are part of Butler's criteria for the human condition of precariousness. The universality of those criteria is highlighted by the simplistic renderings in the main character's sketch book. These drawings function as icons, or universal symbols, which, according to Scott McCloud, strengthen readerly engagement.[228] Thus, the text establishes the shared humanity of the fictional migrant figure and the reader. By witnessing the protagonist's endeavours to survive without language, the reader is compelled to think about their own approach to navigating such circumstances.

The dependence on communication emphasizes a second aspect of Butlerian precariousness, namely that it must be mutually recognized in order for survival to be secured. Tan's protagonist not only has to find shelter and food, he has to find *someone* to provide him with an opportunity to acquire those things. Here, the book relates to a suggestion by Bhabha, who contends that what is often labelled as a "migrant crisis" in public discourse is actually a "reception crisis."[229] This shifts the responsibility for refugee provision towards the international and national communities receiving survival migration. *The Arrival* might serve as an exemplary tale about a more ideal reception of refugees, a notion that has very much been intended by Tan himself.[230] Through the omission of verbal language, the reader senses the main character's

[226] Tan, "The Arrival."
[227] Tan, *The Arrival*, chap. 2, chap. 3.
[228] McCloud, *Understanding*, 30-31. Tan repeatedly mentions being influenced by McCloud's *Understanding Comics* in the creation of *The Arrival*, see for example Shaun Tan, "The Arrival;" Nicolas Verstappen, "Shaun Tan," accessed February 7, 2022, https://www.du9.org/en/entretien/shaun-tan922/.
[229] Jaqueline Bhabha, *Migrant Crisis*, 63.
[230] Verstappen, "Shaun Tan."

helplessness and vulnerability. By depicting overwhelmingly positive and accepting reactions, often by people who have themselves a story of migration to tell, *The Arrival* narrates a paradigmatic encounter of survival migrants. Thus, the book inhabits an empathetic stance towards refugees. As the indeterminacy of the world and its characters highlights the universal human experience of migration, its positive vision of integration and care counters the historically "constant … range of mechanisms for responding to this mobility, characterized by power asymmetries and self-interest" identified by Bhabha.[231] Therefore, the book's advocacy of migrant support has only become more urgent since its publication almost a decade prior to the recent crises of mass displacement.

The archetypal narrative strategy of *The Arrival* pertains to its setting as much as it does to its migration plot. The first panorama of the place is a view from the seaside as the protagonist approaches by boat. Its two most characteristic features are its vast skyline and a monumental statue, both references to New York.[232] The statue, however, is a representation of two colossal migrant figures standing on separate boats, shaking hands. Thereby the monument announces the welcoming nature of the metropolis which is "an ideal city that has never existed, a sort of Promised Land for the migrants of the whole world, a haven of respect, peace, and prosperity."[233] The conflation of an idealized fictional setting with references to real places such as New York City is an example for the potential of artistic representations to offer new angles on real events and human experiences. Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky has identified that a habitual relationship to our environment ultimately obscures our surroundings from perception: "[a]fter we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and

[231] Jaqueline Bhabha, *Migrant Crisis*, 3.
[232] Groensteen, "The Arrival (2006)," 137-138.
[233] Groensteen, "The Arrival (2006)," 138.

we know about it, but we do not see it – hence we cannot say anything significant about it."[234] Tan's city is filled with strange and unconventional architecture, as well as fantastic animals, especially birds. Furthermore, there are various technologies that seem at once futuristic and outdated, including balloon-based flying public transportation or the huge machine in the protagonist's room which functions as a shower.[235] All of these unfamiliar elements are as foreign to the reader as they are to the protagonist, and both go through the process of learning to navigate the city together over the course of the plot. This gradually reduces the bewildering nature of the environment, producing a readerly sensation of refamiliarization that mimics the integration of the main character into the local culture and his settlement into a new home.[236]

Although the work is narrated in an archetypal aesthetic mode, it is nonetheless firmly grounded in actual migration history. The world of *The Arrival* is informed by much research and its events are based on real personal experiences, despite the fantastical appearance of the city and the fictionality of its characters. Furthermore, the book alludes to its historic referentiality via a monochrome style in sepia tones which makes the panels look like early photography (Fig. 7).[237] These stylistic choices and the inspiration taken from historic events constitute acts of fictionalization. However, instead of giving narrative coherence to subjectively experienced events of the past, fictionalization here enables the perception of migration as it is experienced anywhere. Shklovsky illuminates this relationship of object to artistic text: "[a]n image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed

[234] Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2017), 9, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[235] Tan, *The Arrival*, chap. 1.
[236] A similar argument has been forwarded by Bidisha Banerjee, see "Creating a 'Well-Fitted Habitus': Material Culture, Homemaking and Diasporic Belonging in Shaun Tan's the Arrival," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 7, no. 1 (2016): 55, https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2015.1134610.
[237] Groensteen, "The Arrival (2006)," 139, 141-145; Tan, "The Arrival."

Figure 7 *The Arrival*, chap. 1 (permission of Hachette Australia)

through it, its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object – it creates a vision of the object."[238] By rendering the known phenomenon of migration visually in such a radically unfamiliar yet highly referential way, Tan highlights the historical presence and ubiquity of migratory experiences. In turn, this means that the refugee stories of *The Arrival* might not be precise representations of actual events, but the experiences they convey are very much real. Some critics have argued that the idealized narration of the successful integration of the protagonist and eventually his family into the strange city is a weakness of the text.[239] I contend, however, that this benevolent progression marks the book's innovative call for a positive cultural image of survival migrants, and a reassertion of the ability of refugees to participate economically, culturally, and socially in their host society.

[238] Shklovsky, "Technique," 11-12.
[239] Michael Boatright claims that *The Arrival* is an "uncritical reiteration of the 'American dream' myth." For his harsh reading and insightful critical responses, see Banerjee, "habitus," 54-55; and Singer, "Cute monsters," 81-82.

Home, Refugee Superheroes, and the American Archetype

The story of *Home* is set during the initial weeks of the Trump presidency and takes place mostly in Texas and at the Mexican-US border. These concrete parameters indicate that the relationship of depicted world to factual reality in the work by Julio Anta and Anna Wieszczyk contrasts with that of *The Arrival*. Instead of rendering a generalized immigration experience and creating an indeterminate fictional environment unfamiliar to any reader, *Home* chooses a specific recent historical moment and a place which has become a major focus of immigration policy and subject to heated political debate over the last three decades.[240] Thus, the fictionalization of a time and place so close and familiar to the American readership serves to shift perspectives on the socio-political topic the series engages, namely the immigration and integration of the Latin community in the US today, and by extension the immigration of racialized minorities at large. To achieve this, Anta deploys the narrative conventions of the superhero genre, claiming the most archetypal paradigm of contemporary American popular culture for Latinx identity.[241] This powerful act of artistic subversion is the focus of this section, as well as the interplay between some common tropes of the superhero genre with the harsh realities faced by Latinx survival migrants at the Mexican-US border. *Home* insistently challenges the dominance of white characters in superhero comics and thereby invites a critical reconsideration of Anglo-American cultural identity and its role in US society.[242]

The beginning of *Home* initiates such reconsideration by intervening against the official narrative put forward by American authorities during the Trump presidency. The opening pages

[240] For a summary of the historical development of American border policing at the Mexican-US border, see Jones, *Violent Borders*, chap. 2.
[241] On the dominance of superhero comics in America as opposed to European and Japanese traditions of graphic literature, see Chute, *Why Comics?*, 70-75. To acknowledge the heterogenous and diverse make-up of the Latin American community in the US, I will employ the LGBTQ-inclusive signifier Latinx.
[242] Anta is vocal about his own activist agenda in the afterwords and reader responses appended to the initial installments of *Home*.

of the book show the arduous journey of Juan Gomez and his mother Mercedes from Guatemala to the US border on foot, via bus, on freight trains, and the back of trucks, sleeping in the wild.[243] This series of images of refugeehood is accompanied by the voice of the Attorney General of the US, declaring Trump's zero tolerance policy, stating that "[a]ll Americans are hurt by the uncontrolled, illegal migration of cold-blooded criminals."[244] The disparity between verbal and visual representation in these panels shows that the degrading and hateful speech is not grounded in the reality of migration taking place at the Southern US border. Prior to approaching the crossing point, Mercedes voices her hope for a brief immigration procedure followed by a reunion with her sister Gladys.[245] The comic then shows the enforcement of Trump's policies on its protagonists, as they are put in a cold room called the "icebox" and eventually separated.[246] The lack of supernatural events until Juan is separated from his mother emphasizes that these experiences lived by the book's characters are entirely rooted in actual events.[247] As the subsequent superhero narrative embedded in this refugee scenario unfolds, Anta's critical impulses come into full force.

Once separated from Mercedes, Juan's superpowers begin to activate.[248] By bestowing such forces on a Guatemalan refugee, Anta interrogates fundamental aspects of belonging and American identity which are usually signified by the superhero archetype. The role of superhero comics in modern-day American cultural consciousness has been formulated by Richard

---

[243] Julio Anta and Anna Wieszczyk, *Home* (Portland: Image Comics, 2021), 7-9.
[244] Anta and Wieszczyk, *Home*, 8.
[245] Anta and Wieszczyk, *Home*, 10.
[246] Anta and Wieszczyk, *Home*, 14-23.
[247] For a report on the icebox, see Dick Durbin, "A visit to the 'icebox,' where border detainees wait for a transfer to ICE," *Chicago Tribune*, April 22, 2019, https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-immigration-ice-detention-centers-border-patrol-durbin-20190418-story.html; for a summary of the inhumane separation policy and its aftermath, see Ed Pilkington, "Parents of 545 children still not found three years after Trump separation policy," *The Guardian*, October 21, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/21/trump-separation-policy-545-children-parents-still-not-found.
[248] Anta and Wieszczyk, *Home*, 23.

Reynolds, who states that "[s]uperhero narratives clearly give substance to certain ideological myths about the society they address: the USA."[249] He goes on to highlight that "[a] key ideological myth of the superhero comics is that the normal and everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended through heroic action – and defended over and over again almost without respite against an endless battery of menaces determined to remake the world for the benefit of aliens, mutants, criminals, or sub-aqua beings from Atlantis … The superhero has a mission to preserve society, not to re-invent it."[250] This exploration of the genre reveals its profoundly conservative interest in preservation. *Home* rebels against this dynamic by reconfiguring the superhero as a racialized survival migrant who is oppressed by the status quo, rather than interested in defending it.

The interactions of the text with the generic and ideological conventions of superhero comics, however, are complex and nuanced. For one, Juan's aunt Gladys is already living in America, working as a nurse, and Gladys' kids are going to school.[251] All family members hold superpowers. Hence, the classic constellation of a hero-figure representing American values defending society is not entirely dislodged by Juan, who has no affiliation with the nation (yet). Rather, the work questions who counts as American in the first place, and on what grounds. Notably, as Gladys' flat is attacked by an ICE squad during her shift, it is her contribution to American society as a tax-paying member of the workforce that heightens Juan's vulnerability to the authorities. Cultural studies scholar John Jennings writes that "[t]here's an idealized notion around what an American looks like and, therefore, what an American superhero looks like. On the other hand, the nation touts its independence, acceptance, and multiculturalism as an example

[249] Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 74.
[250] Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 77.
[251] Anta and Wieszczyk, *Home*, 90, 101.

to the world. The oppressed know the score. We understand that it's not one or the other. It's both."[252] The Latinx community has been historically underrepresented in the superhero genre, especially given that it comprises roughly a fifth of America's population today.[253] Therefore, Anta's work is an important contribution to give voice to this community in American popular culture. The true subversive thrust of *Home*, I argue, is not the identity of its protagonists, but its villains: US Homeland Security and more specifically ICE. If the superhero genre shows, as is suggested by Reynolds, how extraordinary individuals defend the values of the American constitution, then the choice of ICE as villains suggests that America has lost its integrity.[254] Anta implies that the people upholding the founding ideals of the nation are its immigrants, and instead of enjoying the protection of the authorities, they are actively being attacked by them.

This critical reflection on the treatment of Latinx immigrants and survival migrants in the US breaks from the urbanized setting that is common to most superhero stories, which goes to show that the dream of a multicultural America is primarily a metropolitan fantasy. Many superhero characters are based in New York, and Reynolds contends that New York as an urban monument of modernity is the archetypal inspiration for fictional locations, such as Gotham City or Metropolis. Part of New York's appeal, the critic argues, is that it signifies possibility and progress, partially due to its traditional role as the major point of disembarkation for immigrants.[255] As he notices that "migration now occurs through El Paso, Los Angeles or Miami," the relocation of the superhero narrative to rural Texas and Houston seems only

[252] John Jennings, "It's hard being invisible: A Foreword," in *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics* by Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017), xiii.
[253] The statistics are taken from Frederick Luis Aldama, *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017), 3. On the historical presence of Latinx characters in the superhero genre, see Aldama, *Latinx Superheroes*, 7-9.
[254] Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 74.
[255] Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 19.

consequential.[256] The move away from metropolitan East coast areas shows that the vision of America as promised land for immigrants historically associated with New York is far from the reality experienced by Latinx people trying to enter the country in the remote South. The book highlights that there is a rift between the cultural self-image of the US as a place of openness, opportunity, and diversity, and the power relations that govern the immigration process at the Mexican-US border. Despite their ability and willingness to take care of themselves and participate in education and labour, the Gomez family is the target of institutional violence and repressive policies. Therefore, the evil representing that which contradicts American values in *Home* are the US authorities themselves. However, displaying this dynamic in the form of a genre that is uniquely central to American culture is also suggestive of the possibility to remedy the situation, if the oppressing political forces can be changed. As Anta himself puts it in response to a letter from a fan: "it's my hope that this book holds a mirror up to its readers and asks them to confront the cruelty this country often inflicts on those looking for safety."[257]

The narration of the conflict between ICE and a Latinx immigrant family in the genre of superhero comics is a direct counter to the vilification of migrants during the Trump administration. *Home* vigorously discloses and critiques the racial implications of Trump's rhetoric and political actions through its negative depiction of white people. The first white man encountered by the reader is an aggressive-looking and condescending immigration officer who quickly leaves the room so his Spanish-speaking colleague Humberto can take over.[258] Humberto, in contrast, is a lot more cordial. Although he does not prove supportive, his facial expression perpetually exhibits sadness and thereby hints at an inner conflict about his

[256] Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 19.
[257] Julio Anta and Anna Wieszczyk, *Home #3* (Portland: Image Comics, 2021), 24, Comixology.
[258] Anta and Wieszczyk, *Home*, 13.

complicity in a systemic act of violence against his own minority group (Fig. 8).[259] A similar dynamic is depicted between a black female border agent and her white superintendent in the scene where Juan is taken away from his mother Mercedes (Fig. 9). Before approaching the main character, the two are about to separate a nursing mother from her infant child. The woman demonstrates empathy and awareness for the situation of the migrant in front of her, but the superintendent orders her to "grab the damn kid now!"[260] Although the law enforcement agents thereafter are almost exclusively white people, not all white people in the book exhibit aggression towards the Latin characters. Instead, they are profoundly indifferent towards the discrimination and suffering that is literally happening before their eyes. For example, when

Figure 8 *Home*, page 24 (permission of Julio Anta)

Figure 9 *Home*, page 20 (permission of Julio Anta)

[259] The particular theme of complicity in the enforcement of the discriminatory laws of Trump's America have been subject to another powerful comic written by Anta, see Julio Anta and Randy Haldeman, "Sincerely, Agent Mejía," last modified May 15, 2019, https://www.julioanta.com/sincerely-agent-mej.
[260] Anta and Wieszczyk, *Home*, 20.

Figure 10 *Home*, page 44 (permission of Julio Anta)

Figure 11 *Home*, page 57 (permission of Julio Anta)

trying to reach out for Gladys, Juan sees a united family fooling around in the parking lot of the mall, a scene that moves him to tears (Fig. 10).[261] Another instance are the excited-looking tourists leaving the plane in which the handcuffed Mercedes is deported (Fig. 11).[262] On the one hand, this imagery highlights that Trump's policies are meant to protect first and foremost white Anglo-Americans, and also that the silence and ignorance of a complicit majority contributes to the unhindered implementation of these unjust measures. On the other hand, these panels show poignantly what Anglo-America is being protected from: innocent migrants, looking for safety and a stable future. Invoking Shklovsky's idea that what is in front of us is ultimately invisible, I argue that drawing the line between good and bad along the distinction of race is an act of defamiliarization that presents white readers used to overwhelmingly positive depictions of themselves with an opportunity to question their own complicity.

[261] Anta and Wieszczyk, *Home*, 44.
[262] Anta and Wieszczyk, *Home*, 57.

The characters' superpowers invite an allegorical interpretation as a metaphor for their capability to contribute to their host society socially, culturally, and economically. The special abilities of Juan, Gladys, Camila, and Andres, as well as Juan's father Armando amplify the general fact that migration is beneficial for a host country. Furthermore, Armando is denied the fulfillment of his potential in Guatemala, since he chooses to preserve his morals in the face of criminals threatening his life if he refuses to join them. He is killed and Mercedes and Juan are pushed into refugeehood.[263] This shows that the populist idea of making refugees return to their home countries is fundamentally flawed, since these places often fail to provide security. Yet, in the US, the protagonists of *Home* are equally barred from investing their energy constructively, since they need to persistently defend themselves. Moreover, it is their superpowers in particular that earn the characters the attention of ICE. Thus, a reading of superpowers as allegory also illuminates the racial dynamics of the text. *Home* is not countering the political witch hunt of immigrants by simply attempting to condemn white people instead. Rather, the persecution of the Gomez family is exposed as the violent consequence of a specifically white Anglo-American paranoia about non-white immigrants with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds taking over their jobs and replacing them.[264] It is only the threat of physical violence which ever pushes the migrant characters to use their powers against authorities, while otherwise, they go to school (Camila and Andres), to work (Gladys), or anticipate looking for a job (Mercedes), just like everyone else. Anta's use of the superhero genre simultaneously offers a satisfying story of Latinx migrants fighting back with some success against aggressive authorities, while also

[263] Anta and Wieszczyk, *Home*, 86-89.Notably, parental absence and troubled father-son relationships are an archetypal element of the entire superhero genre. See Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, 60-74.
[264] For explorations in the European context of both, replacement myths and the misguided idea that immigrants would push domestic workers out of employment, see Polakow-Suransky, *Go Back*, chap. 8, chap. 10.

highlighting that the real conflict the work describes is based on misperceptions and needless political and legal aggression.

Home mobilizes a modern American archetype to critically reflect on the position of the Latinx community and immigrants, many of which are refugees, in the US today. The work shows that the aggressive framing of migrants as criminal forces seeking to violate the country's border lacks substance and effaces the mistreatment of innocent refugee families. Hillary Chute argues that superhero comics are profoundly invested in disaster, which she identifies as the form's most foundational theme.[265] If we accept Bhabha's notion of a crisis not in migration, but in reception, then the disaster undergirding the plot of *Home* becomes evident: the ruinous border policies of the Trump administration, but also the continued indifference of white majorities towards the precarious situation of vulnerable refugee and immigrant communities in America and beyond. The distilled depiction of a conflict between white-dominated state forces against non-white civilians critically interrogates the racial constellations that precipitate such hostility. By empowering a minority largely ignored within the major canon of the superhero genre, Anta employs comics as a form of cultural activism to resist this trend. Thus, *Home* constitutes a strong example of fictionalization and fictive genre narratives that unmask and confront actual injustice against real refugees and minorities.

[265] Chute, *Why Comics?*, 34.

5. Concluding Remarks

The range of comics concerned with the precarious situation of survival migrants is wide and diverse, including works of both fiction and nonfiction. All graphic works engaging the subject must navigate the challenge to transfer the events, biographies, and histories that serve as narrative impulse onto the page in the form of visual representation. The exemplary texts I have discussed in this thesis employ various distinct aesthetic and narrative strategies to proclaim the humanity of survival migrants. Through visual metaphor *Threads* outlines the connection of the perpetual historical presence of displacement and survival migration to the capitalist world order and the geopolitical division into nation states. Evans also addresses prejudices and hostile rhetoric directly and contrasts them with the reality of her experience, but also her own research. *Rolling Blackouts* provides access to the subjective experience of refugees through a double focalization. The reader follows Sarah Glidden as character through the investigation of refugee stories, and learns about these stories with her. Thus, the work follows the tradition of Joe Sacco and signals the importance of human interaction to journalistic work, unsettling paradigms of balance and objectivity which pose the danger of moral indifference and superficial exchanges between reporter and subject.

The Arrival tells the story of a nameless everyman migrating into an unknown fictional city. Despite its setting in a fantasy world, Tan's work signals historicity by employing aesthetics of early photography and historical references embedded in the text via allegory and visual abstraction. The radical defamiliarization of the city and the wordless narration of *The Arrival* create a readerly sensation of foreignness, and the audience explores the book's world together with its migrant protagonist. This experience generates an empathetic understanding for the

vulnerability and dependence that actual refugees share with Tan's indeterminate main character. In contrast, *Home* takes on the concrete situation of the Latinx community in the US and of survival migrants arriving to the Southern border from Latin America. The conventions of the superhero genre allow Anta to reflect on the structural racism that underpins the unjustified institutional violence that minorities and refugees are subjected to by American authorities. Thus, *Home* shows that genres of popular fiction, such as superhero comics, can participate in the resistance against discriminatory discourses and policies.

All four works employ fictionalization by selecting and recombining elements of the reality refugees are faced with and by representing these in the form of drawings on the page. Throughout my discussion, I have argued that the distinct techniques and approaches of these texts to fictionalizing survival migrants do not inhibit their serious commentary on refugeehood in each specific context. On the contrary, the use of fictionalization enables these works to provide fresh perspectives, new insights, and, ultimately, truths about refugee experiences. The two works of nonfiction, *Threads* and *Rolling Blackouts*, assemble coherent narratives that help the reader develop an understanding of the depicted events. The fictional texts, *The Arrival* and *Home*, fictionalize migrant history and narrativize it in an archetypal mode to offer original angles on survival migration. Through their empathetic treatment of the refugee topic, all these texts contribute as works of activism to the cultural response against the anti-immigration rhetoric and policies proliferating in Western public discourse over recent decades. Drawing implicates seeing, and across a variety of genres and aesthetic approaches to the subject, refugee comics urge their readers to bear witness to the precarious realities of refugees too.

Bibliography

Abdelrazaq, Leila. *Baddawi*. Charlottesville, Virginia: Just World Books, 2015.

Abou Ghaida, Susanne. "The Arrival. by Shaun Tan." *Migration Studies* 9, no. 2 (2021): 318–21. https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnab011.

Adams, Jeff. *Documentary Graphic Novels and Social Realism*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2008.

Agamben, Grigorio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

———. "What Is a Camp?" In *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, 37-45. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Aldama, Frederick Luis. *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics*. Latinx Pop Culture. Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2017.

Anta, Julio and Randy Haldeman. "Sincerely, Agent Mejía." Last modified May 15, 2019. https://www.julioanta.com/sincerely-agent-mej.

Anta, Julio and Anna Wieszczyk. *Home #3*. Portland: Image Comics, 2021. Comixology.

———. *Home*. Portland: Image Comics, 2021.

Banerjee, Bidisha. "Creating a 'Well-Fitted Habitus': Material Culture, Homemaking and Diasporic Belonging in Shaun Tan's the Arrival." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 7, no. 1 (2016): 53–69. https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2015.1134610.

Benli, Ali Emre. "March of refugees: an act of civil disobedience." *Journal of Global Ethics* 14, no. 3 (2018): 315-331, https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2018.1502204.

Betts, Alexander. *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement.* 1 ed., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013., https://doi.org/10.1353/book.43593.

Bhabha, Homi. "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism." In *The Location of Culture*, 94-120. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Bhabha, Jaqueline. *Can We Solve the Migration Crisis?*. Medford: Polity Press, 2018.

Bui, Thi. *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*. New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2017.

Butler, Judith. "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear." In *Precarious Life: Power of Mourning and Justice*, 1-18. London: Verso, 2004.

———. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*. London: Verso, 2010.

Castles, Stephen. *Ethnicity and Globalization*. London: SAGE Publications, 2000. Accessed October 7, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Chute, Hillary. *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*. New York: Harper, 2017.

———. *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Clare, Gerry, Polly Nyiri, Chie Yamamoto, and Emma Preston. "The Calais 'Jungle'." *The British Journal of General Practice : The Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners* 66, no. 651 (2016): 510. https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp16X687193.

Davies, Dominic. "Comics Activism: An Interview with Comics Artist and Activist Kate Evans," *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 7, no. 1 (2017): 18. https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.114.

Dony, Christophe and Caroline Van Linthout. "Comics, Trauma and Cultural Memory(ies) of 9/11." In *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*, edited by Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest, 178-187. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010.

Durbin, Dick. "A visit to the 'icebox,' where border detainees wait for a transfer to ICE." *Chicago Tribune*, April 22, 2019, https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-immigration-ice-detention-centers-border-patrol-durbin-20190418-story.html.

Earle, Harriet E. H. *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60626.

———. “The Politics of Lace in Kate Evans’ *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (2017).” *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1-19. https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.215.

Emcke, Carolin. *Against Hate*. Translated by Tony Crawford. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

Etzler, Thomas, and Sheena McKenzie. “Almost 350 migrants are stranded on two boats in the Mediterranean.” CNN, June 24, 2018. https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/24/europe/maersk-lifeline-migrants-stranded-mediterranean-intl/index.html.

Evans, Kate. *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis*. London: Verso, 2017.

“Executive Order 13769 of January 27, 2017, Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States.” Federal Register 28, no. 20 (2017): 8977-8982. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2017-02-01/pdf/2017-02281.pdf.

Filzmaier, Peter. “Preface – Migration and Public Opinion.” In *The Migrant Crisis: European Perspectives and National Discourses*, edited by Ulrike Klinger, Markus Rhomberg, Uta Rußmann, translated by Sebastian Niemetz, 7-8. Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2017.

Fontanari, Elena. *Lives in Transit : An Ethnographic Study of Refugees' Subjectivity Across European Borders*. Studies in Migration and Diaspora. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019. https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.4324/9781351234061.

Frow, John. *Genre*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Glidden, Sarah. *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq*. Montréal, Québec: Drawn & Quarterly, 2016.

Graham-Morrison, Emma. “At Keleti station in Budapest, the refugees could wait no longer.” *The Guardian*, September 6, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/06/keleti-station-budapest-refugees.

Groensteen, Thierry. “The Arrival (2006).” In *The Expanding Art of Comics: Ten Modern Masterpieces*, 131-148. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2017.

Grove, Laurence. “Scotland, the Cradle of Comics.” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 134, no. 3 (2019): 601–13. doi:10.1632/pmla.2019.134.3.601.

Haddad, Emma. “The Refugee: Forging National Identities.” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 2, no. 2 (2002): 23-38.

Halpern, Jake, and Michael Sloan. *Welcome to the New World*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020.

Heitz, Thomas. *Kritische Politische Bildung. Herausforderungen in Der Auseinandersetzung Mit Pegida Und Neo-Rassismus*. Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag, 2017. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=5150541.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Fictive and the Imaginary : Charting Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore: J. Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Jennings, John. “It’s hard being invisible: A Foreword.” In *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics* by Frederick Luis Aldama, xi-xiv. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017.

Krüger, Steffen. “Violence and the Virtual: Right-wing, Anti-asylum Facebook Pages and the Fomenting of Political Violence.” In *Fomenting Political Violence: Fantasy, Language, Media, Action*, edited by Steffen Krüger, Karl Figlio, and Barry Richards, 75–102. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Manea, Dragoș, and Mihaela Precup. “Infantilizing the Refugee: On the Mobilization of Empathy in Kate Evans’ *Threads from the Refugee Crisis*.” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 35, no. 2 (2020): 481-487. https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2020.1738078.

Marrus, Michael Robert, and Mazal Holocaust Collection. *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper, 1993.

Mickwitz, Nina. “Comics Telling Refugee Stories.” In *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage*, edited by Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind, 277-296. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Möller, Judith. “Filter Bubbles and Digital Echo Chambers.” In *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, edited by Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord, 92-100. New York: Routledge, 2021.

Mould, Oli. “The Calais Jungle: A slum of London’s making.” *City* 21, no. 3-4 (2017): 388-404. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2017.1325231.

Nahaboo, Zaki, and Nathan Kerrigan. *Migrants, Borders and the European Question: The Calais Jungle*. Mobility & Politics. Springer Link. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75922-3.

Nguyen, Marguerite, and Catherine Fung. “Refugee Cultures: Forty Years after the Vietnam War.” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 41, no. 3 (2016): 1-7. muse.jhu.edu/article/631769.

Pariser, Eli. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*. New York: Penguin Press, 2011.

Pew Research Center. “Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015.” Published August 2, 2016. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/.

Pilkington, Ed. “Parents of 545 children still not found three years after Trump separation policy.” *The Guardian*, October 21, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/21/trump-separation-policy-545-children-parents-still-not-found.

Polakow-Suransky, Sasha. *Go Back to Where You Came From: The Backlash Against Immigration and the Fate of Western Democracy*. New York: Nation Books, 2017.

Reilly, Katie. “Here Are All the Times Donald Trump Insulted Mexico.” *TIME*, August 31, 2016. https://time.com/4473972/donald-trump-mexico-meeting-insult/.

Reynolds, Richard. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994.

Rifkind, Candida. “Spotlight on Migrant & Refugee Comics.” *Extra Inks*, July 8, 2018. https://extra-inks.comicssociety.org/2018/07/08/spotlight-on-migrant-and-refugee-comics/.

———. “Migrant Detention Comics and the Aesthetic Technologies of Compassion.” In *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage*, edited by Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind, 297-316. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Sacco, Joe. *Journalism*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2012.

Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2007.

Saunders, Ben. "Divisions in Comics Scholarship." *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 124, no. 1 (2009): 292–94. doi:10.1632/S0030812900168919.

Schmid, Johannes. "Comics as Memoir and Documentary: A Case Study of Sarah Glidden." In *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage*, edited by Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind, 317-333. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Shacknove, Andrew E. "Who Is a Refugee?" *Ethics* 95, no. 2 (1985): 274-84.

Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, 8-14. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Siddique, Haroon. "1,100 migrants cross Channel on small boats to UK in two days." *Guardian*, October 10, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/oct/10/1100-migrants-cross-channel-small-boats-uk-two-days.

Singer, Rüdiger. "Cute monsters and early birds: foreignness in graphic novels on migration by Shaun Tan and Paula Bulling." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 11, no. 1 (2020): 74-95. https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2019.1624270.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, 2004.

Steiner, David. "Hoax-Watch: Die Wahrheit über Flüchtlinge? (2)" mokant.at. Accessed October 27, 2021. http://mokant.at/1601-falschmeldungen-fluechtlinge-fake-bilder-hoax-2/.

Stuteville, Sarah. "Seattle Marine revisits Iraq; mission accomplished, not over." *Seattle Times*, May 31, 2011. https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/seattle-marine-revisits-iraq-mission-accomplished-not-over/.

Tan, Shaun. *The Arrival*. New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007.

———. "The Arrival." Accessed February 6, 2022. https://www.shauntan.net/arrival-book.

Taylor, Alan. “France Dismantles 'The Jungle' in Calais.” *The Atlantic*, October 26, 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2016/10/france-dismantles-the-jungle-in-calais/505481/.

Taylor, Diane. “Life, death and limbo in the Calais ‘Jungle’ – five years after its demolition.” *Guardian*, November 2, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/02/life-death-and-limbo-in-the-calais-jungle-five-years-after-its-demolition.

UNHCR. *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2010. https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.

———. “2010 High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges: Background Paper: Protection Gaps and Responses (Rev.1).” unhcr.org. Last modified November 30, 2010. https://www.unhcr.org/protection/hcdialogue%20/4cebeeee9/2010-high-commissioners-dialogue-protection-challenges-background-paper.html.

———. “The Nationality and Borders Bill.” unhcr.org. https://www.unhcr.org/uk/uk-immigration-and-asylum-plans-some-questions-answered-by-unhcr.html. Accessed December 9, 2021.

Verstappen, Nicolas. “Shaun Tan.” Accessed February 7, 2022. https://www.du9.org/en/entretien/shaun-tan922/.

Vorländer Hans, Maik Herold, and Schäller Steven. *Pegida and New Right-Wing Populism in Germany*. New Perspectives in German Political Studies. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67495-7.

Webb, Kaye and Ronald Searle. *Refugees 1960: A Report in Words and Drawings by Kaye Webb and Ronald Searle*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960.

Woo, Benjamin. “Reconsidering Comics Journalism: Information and Experience in Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*.” In *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*, edited by Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest, 164-177. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2010.

Yakushko, Oksana F. *Modern-Day Xenophobia: Critical Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on the Roots of Anti-Immigrant Prejudice*. Palgrave Pivot. Springer Link. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00644-0.

YouTube. “Dresden 25.6.2018 AFD Pegida schreit "absaufen".” Filmed June 25, 2018 at the Neumarkt, Dresden, Germany. Video, 0:13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yHeYiFEaHM.

YouTube. “PEGIDA - Rede von Götz Kubitschek am 5. Oktober 2015 in Dresden.” Filmed October 5, 2015 in Dresden, Germany. Video, 0:48. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1F67fDCbUY.