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INTRODUCTION (Davies and Rifkind)

In Plenitudes: Reading Refugee Narratives

French cartoonist Fabien Toulmé's comics trilogy, *Hakim's Odyssey* (2020-22), is a monumental 752-page graphic narrative. It depicts the real story of its eponymous protagonist's three-year journey from Syria across the Middle East and Europe to France, where he is reunited with his family and granted asylum. At the beginning of volume one, Hakim is a single young man running a successful garden centre in suburban Damascus, but everything changes with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2015. In 2016, after being mistaken for someone else, arrested and then tortured in prison, Hakim is forced to leave Syria. He shuttles around cities in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey for two years, during which time he meets his wife, a fellow Syrian refugee named Najmeh, with whom he has a son, Hadi. While Najmeh and her parents manage to secure asylum status in France Hakim and Hadi face a series of bureaucratic errors and have to make the clandestine journey to France on their own. While the three volumes of *Hakim's Odyssey* make it an uncommonly long refugee comic, its unique personal narrative repeats familiar stories of forced departures, overland journeys on foot, perilous journeys by sea, life in humanitarian camps, and illegal border crossings that have long dominated "the migrant image" in media and governmental discourses (Demos 2013). Drawn in the legible clear line style of classic French *bandes dessinées*, Toulmé constructs appealing characters in an effort to humanise the refugee experience. As he writes at the beginning of volume one: "It's much harder to feel compassion for statistics quoted at the end of a broadcast than for people whose stories we know, or can at least imagine" (Toulmé 2020, 4).

Despite its titular gesture to epic narrative, *Hakim's Odyssey* is about the everyday experiences of people thrown into the refugee situation, including banal moments of waiting,

walking, eating, talking, sleeping, and communicating online. Skirting the margins of European society and evading detection, *Hakim's Odyssey* dedicates its final volume to Hakim and Hadi's undercover journey from Greece to France, where the seemingly extraordinary images of groups of migrants travelling clandestinely on foot are contextualised with sequences of the young father and son travelling openly on buses, taxis, and trains alongside European citizens. Similarly, the many people who help Hakim navigate his journey as both an asylum seeker and a newly single parent undercut the heroic quest journey alluded to in the book's title. In all three volumes, Toulmé illustrates that, while Hakim may lack many things – and the state of the refugee is so often represented as one of lack – he is rich in social capital. Not only does he rely on his extended kin and friendship networks among the Syrian diaspora, but while in transit he easily makes new friends and alliances with other migrants, as well as settled immigrants and Arabic speakers, building mutual aid relationships in the process (see Fig. 0.1)

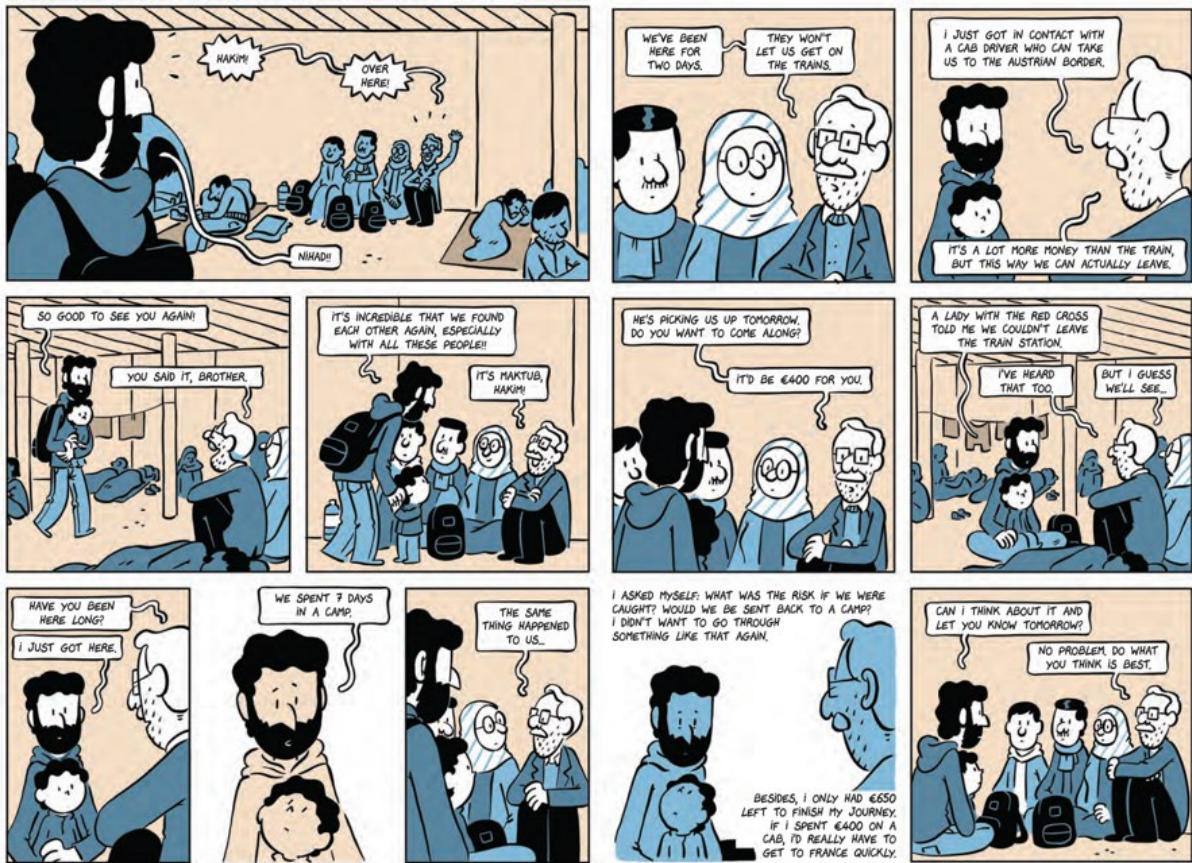


Fig. 0.1: Hakim and Hadi reunite with a Syrian family in Hungary (Toulmé 2022b, 138 & 39).

Hakim's Odyssey illustrates that sovereign borders are not merely barriers upheld at the territorial perimeters of nation-states. Rather, as the comic shows, they extend deep into the interior of national territories to encircle and enclose the bodies of non-citizens. In Beirut, Hakim worries about Syrian secret service agents seeing him on the street and having him deported. In Istanbul, as the Turkish economy fails, Hakim and Najmeh fear victimisation as a consequence of rising tensions in their neighbourhood. In Hungary, father and son retreat from the suspicious gaze of shoppers in a grocery store and hurry on their way. As Europeans lash out at them in train stations and alert the police of their presence, borders are revealed as territorially diffused technologies of seeing and socially vigilant mechanisms of reporting. Yet against these hostile visualities, which may lead to detention and deportation, *Hakim's*

Odyssey repeatedly insists that refugees are also seen by each other, producing counter visualities that build networks of graphic refuge.

Though not a professional journalist, Toulmé repeatedly reminds readers that this is a work of non-fiction by returning to the protracted scene of storytelling – he met with Hakim every few months over several years. These encounters between the comics journalist and the refugee storyteller take place in Hakim’s apartment in France, where he now lives having been granted asylum with his three sons and his wife, Najmeh. Toulmé changes their names to protect their privacy and he does not draw the translator who worked with them “for narrative reasons,” one of several decisions that he flags in the book’s preface as a “betrayal” of documentary transparency, but which he nevertheless declares “have changed nothing of the substance of the narrative, which is a true story” (Toulmé 2020, n.p.). Sometimes, Hakim interrupts his personal narrative to tell Fabien he needs to explain the political or cultural contexts to the French cartoonist. At other times, he shows Fabien social media images and photos on his phone to illustrate his oral narrative. Their ongoing relationship as interlocutors and Hakim’s agency over the structure and visualisation of his testimony provides an outer frame for the extended refugee narrative: Hakim is not “framed” as criminal by state bureaucracy or a hostile media landscape, but is rather empowered to frame his story on his own terms.

Meanwhile, by drawing himself in, Toulmé self-reflexively reminds readers that this is a mediated tale, transcribed from oral narrative into comics. *Hakim’s Odyssey* is one of the longest contemporary refugee comics narratives to date, and while it does perpetuate some familiar visual and narrative tropes of the refugee experience, it also domesticates the refugee experience on a number of levels: Toulmé brings it “home” to the world of French comics and the books were quickly translated into English and released by a US publisher; he emphasises the everyday lives of asylum-seekers and their ordinary moments in ways that

will be familiar to non-refugee readers; he shows how those designated as refugees occupy the same social spaces as citizens even as their bodies are marked as foreign; and he situates the scene of story transmission within the domestic setting of the refugee's home where he can perform the role of host rather than guest.

Critical refugee scholars often point out that storytelling is inextricably linked to the refugee experience, most pressingly at the moment when the asylum-seeker must narrate their experience of persecution in a legal setting before state representatives then deem them worthy of refugee status (see Nguyen 2023). As such, writes Bishopal Limbu, “refugee narratives are not simply about refugees; they also participate in constructing and producing refugees both discursively (through representational norms and practices) and materially (through the bestowal or withholding of rights and protections)” (2023, 39). The very category of the refugee thus emerges from the construction and performance of a first-person narrative before a juridico-legal regime, a structure that defines and limits what is recognisable as a refugee story before it has even taken place. As *Hakim's Odyssey* and many other refugee comics discussed in this book illustrate, however, refugee stories are much more involved and complex, everyday and ordinary, and even joyful and lighthearted than either the legal discursive construction or the dominant migrant image are able to convey.

We begin *Graphic Refuge* with an example of a refugee comic that offers “narrative plenitude,” a term used by critical refugee scholars to refer to “narratives that move beyond refugee victimhood or innocence, that comprehend refugees as diverse and complex, eluding attempts to reduce them to stereotypes and well-worn conventions” (Espiritu & Nguyen 2023, 21; see also Than Nguyen 2016). Comics join prose, poetry, theatre, film, photography, visual art, popular music, video games, and other narrative forms in this work to open the category of “the refugee” to a variety of subject positions that exceed its narrow legal definition, even as they critique its origins in the histories of colonialism and systems of

racial capitalism that have driven mass displacement in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. By loosening the definition of “the refugee” to include categories such as migrants, camp detainees, and asylum seekers, and to consider refugee “status” as a condition that lasts long after the granting of political refuge, in this book we follow developments in critical refugee studies by reorienting our understanding of refugeedom from individuals to structures, and from legal definitions to complex narratives. Most importantly, we aim to show how contemporary graphic narratives are drawing into view “the creativity – ways of enduring and transforming – that refugees call upon as they navigate social and historical conditions” (Nguyen 2023, 4).

Comprised of a multi-modal and visual-verbal form that has long crossed borders between genres, cultures, and artistic traditions, comics are especially adept at conveying the narrative plenitudes of refugee stories. And if comics are, in all productive senses of the word, undisciplined, then they are also inherently political: “every comic is involved in the creation and articulation of regimes of the visible and the readable, the utterable and the invisible,” writes Katherine Kelp-Stebbins; “such regimes necessarily frame a political sensibility and play a role in the formation of certain reading communities in space and time” (2019, 76). Motivated by comics’ proven ability to construct new political communities, this book investigates refugee comics for the ways in which they both normalise and destabilise the regimes of the visible that are crucial to the maintenance of regimes of border control. In addition to their narrative content, comics do this work through formal features such as page layouts, panel borders, sequential juxtapositions, and aesthetic techniques, all of which equip them to draw into view the braided geographies and extra-territorial social relations of migrancy. Throughout, we use the phrase “refugee comics” to refer expansively to graphic narratives that are about, by, or collaboratively produced with refugees. We include comics that attend both to the experience and apprehension of migration at multiple levels, from the

global scale of human displacement as it takes place within and between nation-states, to the exponential proliferation of border infrastructures such as detention centres and refugee camps, to profound shifts in the visualisation of refugees and the circulation of such representations, particularly as these have been driven by developments in digital and social media platforms.

Origins and Orientations: Implicated Subjects and Citizen-Viewers

The idea for this book has its roots in a panel discussion hosted at the 2018 inaugural conference of the Comics Studies Society (CSS) in Urbana-Champaign. Noting the range of interdisciplinary and sub-disciplinary skills demanded by graphic narrative, a group of scholarly editors identified the field of comics studies as a particularly generative place for collaborative publications that fall somewhere between the solo-authored monograph and edited collection of essays. Having spent the previous two years working together as co-editors of *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage* (2020), this struck a chord with us. We had both learned a great deal from that project and were eager to continue working on refugee comics collaboratively, enlivened as we were by the overlaps and distinctions in each other's choices of texts and critical approaches. While we are indebted to the work of many other excellent comics scholars, including those who contributed to *Documenting Trauma*, we decided to turn in this project to a book with individually authored chapters and a co-written Introduction and Epilogue, with the aim of enabling a series of sustained individual inquiries while also building them into something more than the sum of their parts. The process has allowed us to workshop our arguments, learn from one another's different readings and disciplinary expertise, and build a

scholarly conversation into what we hope is a truly generative exchange. The book we present here, *Graphic Refuge*, is the result of this collaboration.

We come to this project as readers, teachers, and researchers of refugee comics who are situated in two nation-states with different yet overlapping colonial histories and privileged positions in the global economic order. Dom grew up in Stoke-on-Trent in the UK's West Midlands, a regional city enriched by migrants and refugees who have over multiple generations arrived from different parts of Britain's Empire and its postcolonies to make their home in the geographic centre of England. His political consciousness dawned with the US and UK-led war on Iraq in 2003, and hardened against the intensifying anti-migrant discourse that came to saturate British politics in the years that followed. After studying imperial histories while volunteering with refugee action groups and avidly reading graphic narratives, Dom is now based in London as a Senior Lecturer in English who teaches many students from first-, second-, and third-generation migrant backgrounds.

Candida Rifkind never quite feels at home: born into a Jewish British family three generations after their migration from Eastern Europe, she arrived in Canada with her family at the age of ten after an early childhood in apartheid-era Johannesburg. She is a Professor of English at the University of Winnipeg in Canada, an urban, economic, and cultural space founded on the genocidal violence of settler colonialism and the land thefts of Treaty One, the first of the eleven numbered treaties that established western Canada, signed in 1871 between seven First Nations and the British Crown. This place that bears the scars of centuries of settler colonialism is nevertheless sustained by the ongoing land and water stewardship, as well as the political resistances and resurgences, of First Nation and Métis peoples. Winnipeg is also a city that has been shaped by migrants, immigrants, and refugees, from early twentieth-century Jewish, Ukrainian, Icelandic, Polish, and other Europeans, to later twentieth-century arrivals from Southeast Asia and the Philippines, to the early twenty-

first century relocation of people displaced from Somalia, Eritrea, and Syria, and other conflict zones.

In our personal and professional lives, we work with and learn from students, colleagues, and artists for whom colonialism, war, genocide, forced displacement, racism, and economic precarity are both deeply embedded in their families and part of the living histories and ongoing experiences of their own lives. While we both enjoy the security of academic positions and the privileges of whiteness, we recognize ourselves in Michael Rothberg's concept of "implicated subjects" who at once inhabit and inherit "regimes of domination" but "do not originate or control such regimes," a recognition that can offer "potential starting points for those who want to transform implication and refigure it as the basis of a differentiated, long-distance solidarity" (Rothberg 2019, 200). That said, we remain mindful of Rothberg's warning that the implicated subject "is not an identity, but rather a figure to think with and through" (199), one that many refugee comics themselves anticipate, imagine, and visualize, and which we theorise below as an implied citizen-viewer. Most importantly, we follow Rothberg's insistence that the implicated subject is "not a solution but a problem" (200), reading twenty-first-century comics for the ways in which they draw into view the multiple forces, figures, systems, and structures that govern the uneven relations between citizens and refugees.

To this end, while our primary focus is on the contemporary, our aim is also to show how comics bring the longer and often layered histories of the refugee experience into view. We attend closely to the relationship between displacement and the destabilisation of entire regions through recent western military intervention, as well as the much longer histories of imperial wealth extraction and colonial border-making that lie behind the inequalities and conflicts driving migration in the twenty-first-century. Throughout we make a point of emphasising the colonial roots not only of contemporary borders, but also of the way in

which those borders and the people they contain have been visualised by states of different kinds. This is why we have included in the book's subtitle Nicholas Mirzoeff's term "visuality," which describes "a medium for the transmission and dissemination of authority, and the means for the mediation of those subject to that authority" (2011, xv). As Mirzoeff observes, visuality has evolved over centuries and in conjunction with our other keyword, "mobility," from the policing of slave plantations through imperial warfare and settler colonial administration to the counterinsurgency regime that has emerged in the wake of the war on terror. We pay keen attention to the violent accretions of history that are folded into current ways of seeing refugees, even as we mobilise this historical consciousness to inform an analysis that is centred firmly on twenty-first century images.

The majority of comics that we explore here were almost all published in the wake of the so-called refugee "crisis" that transformed western political discourse in the summer of 2015. We include that word "crisis" in quotation marks because it implies a sudden or unanticipated rupture in a system that is otherwise functioning smoothly and as normal, a framing that is only tenable when the situation is viewed from a perspective of relative privilege and security. Certainly, there was a spike in migrant arrivals to Europe in 2015, but for those Syrians, Iraqis, Kurds, Libyans, Afghans, Eritreans, and others seeking refuge, the nation-state system – with its elusive promise of territorial sovereignty and its grouping of people according to ethnic and racialised identities – has been a source of crisis, war, and displacement for years, and in some cases decades and even centuries.

This perspectival context is important not only because the production of refugee comics has increased exponentially since the emergence of the "crisis" rhetoric of 2015, but also because so many (though by no means all) of these graphic narratives are aimed by their publishers and creators to be read by readers who themselves enjoy secure citizenship status. The outward intention of these comics – often explicitly announced on covers and other

promotional materials, though just as often implied in their actual content and form – is to draw the attention of reading “citizens” to the stories of those who are deprived of such privileges with a view to educate and inform. As we worked on this book’s different chapters and sat for some time with our readings of these graphic narratives, it became apparent that to fully understand their interpretive possibilities we needed to theorise not only our own subject positions, but the subject position that so many refugee comics seemed to be addressing; that indeed, we could only fully understand and describe the different kinds of work that refugee comics were trying to do when we paused to account for the kind of reader they were trying *to do that work on*.

To that end, we will throughout use the imperfect, interchangeable phrases “citizen-viewer” and “citizen-reader” to denote the position of the reader who is so often implied by the refugee comics analysed in this book. The citizen-viewer is not an abstract figure or ideal type, but the subject position that is repeatedly constructed and addressed by refugee comics. Others possibilities we might have chosen included the figure of the “western reader” or “implicated subject,” or we might simply have made more expansive use of collectives such as “we” and “us,” referring with those pronouns not only to Davies and Rifkind (as we are doing in this introduction), but to all readers of refugee comics. However, these alternatives presented significant limitations. Capitalism’s sharply uneven global development means that border walls are today present within as well as between nation-states and geopolitical blocs: there are many migrants, asylum seekers, and others with ambiguous citizenship status who are situated in “the west” and who may well be readers of comics, just as there are minoritised or racialised readers who may have such rights in name, but who are made by aggressively nationalist cultures or institutional racisms to feel insecure in their citizenship. Such simple labels would limit our understanding of “the refugee” to a legal category and juridical-political form, occluding the more expansive experiences of what Vinh Nguyen calls

“refugee subjects,” which includes “those who have sought, are seeking, or will imminently seek refuge” (Nguyen 2023, 23-24). It is our aim to adopt this broader understanding throughout this book.

With this in mind, it would seem even more reductive to use the collective pronoun and assume that “we” readers of comics are all beneficiaries of citizenship rights, somehow sharing in a singular geographic and legal – not to mention cultural – perspective. The phrases “citizen-viewer” and “citizen-reader” allow us to break apart this idea of “the citizen” as a reified or inherently stable position, and instead to show how it is constructed as the dialectical interlocutor of the refugee subject, the two producing one another through their constantly shifting and mutually constructing inter-relationship. An implicated and implied subject position, the “citizen-reader” allows us to flag to *you*, the reader of *our* book, those specific moments when it matters that a refugee comic is addressing itself to a reader who enjoys the privileges of citizenship, without our assuming that all readers – yourself included – do in fact benefit from those privileges in the present, or do not have some past or future experience of refugee subjecthood. This is not a theoretical exercise: as we hope will become apparent in the chapters that follow, this contingent understanding of the citizen-viewer and refugee subject as relative positionalities permits a more nuanced disaggregation of the multiple perspectives that are in play in refugee comics. As our title suggests, in this book our concern lies not with the relationship between comics and a politics of citizenship, but between comics and a more expansive politics of *refugeetude* as “a coming into consciousness of the social, political, and historical forces that situate refugee subjects, and the acts that attempt to know, impact, and transcend this situation” (Nguyen 2023, 111). The question that guides all of our readings might therefore be framed in this way: how do refugee comics bring about this historical consciousness for their implied citizen-viewers?

Looking and Framing: Thinking Through Refugee Comics

This book pursues this question through six in-depth chapter studies. These inquiries explore print and digital comics that variously document and imagine different aspects of the refugee experience, from initial conflicts and war zones, to perilous sea journeys and border crossings, to humanitarian camps, detention centres, deportation programmes, and resettlement schemes. The chapters not only interrogate the ways in which graphic narratives document the violence of racialised visualities, hardening borders, and an ever-expanding deportation regime, though this they certainly do. They also ask how comics might make readers conscious of and reorient the relationships between artists, readerships, and refugees, as these take place both across and within the world's increasingly militarised borders. We also seek to disrupt the temporal and spatial linearity of the refugee "quest narrative" (Bernard 2023, 67), in which racialised subjects are described fleeing chaos at home to be benevolently given refuge by liberal states in the west. Although Part One begins with sea journeys and camp detentions, in Part Two we pull back from reading the trajectories of refugee journeys to examine how both print and online interactive comics can draw out the colonial and neocolonial processes of war, displacement, and their aftermaths. Part Three then expands the geographical and temporal scope of the book: it moves backwards, returning to scenes of domicide in the destruction of cities that forces people to flee their homes; and it also travels forward across both generations and continents to see how the artist children of refugees are drawing their own and their parents' lives in the wake of resettlement. By tracing and re-tracing these different refugee contexts and stages of refugee lives, and putting multiple generational experiences, geographical contexts, and cultural histories into dialogue with each other, we are more interested in the material and visual spaces in which the

category of the refugee is made and remade than in individual characters or personalised narratives.

The first five chapters of *Graphic Refuge* explore comics and graphic narratives charting the human and non-human costs of seismic events that have impacted the Middle East and Europe since 2000: the US-led invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003; the series of uprisings and government crackdowns of the Arab Spring beginning in 2010, and which led to the start of the Syrian Civil War in March 2015; the Greek government's erection of a fence on the European Union's southern border with Turkey in 2012, and subsequent increased border controls and closures by Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, and other EU member states; and the expanded mandate of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (commonly known as Frontex) through "Joint Operation Poseidon," initially rolled out in 2006 and intensified in 2015 with the increased border patrolling of Greek islands and the Aegean. The final chapter looks to comics auto/biographies of earlier mass displacements such as the Palestinian Nakba (1948) and Vietnam War (1954-1975) from the perspective of second-generation refugees settled in the US and Australia. Throughout, we have focused our analysis on refugee experiences that involve transit across continents and oceans in addition to state borders, and we have concentrated on Europe, the US, and Australia as destination sites of refuge for people displaced primarily from the Middle East and Indochina. These parameters are partly invited by the field of anglophone refugee comics, which has clustered most actively around representations of post-2000 Middle Eastern refugee experiences in comics journalism and 1970s Vietnamese refugee experiences by second-generation diasporic artists.

This is not to diminish the importance of other refugee comics or border contexts, such as the Partition of India and the US-Mexico border (see contributions to Davies and Rifkind 2020; Naghibi et al. 2020; Kauranen et al. 2023). Rather, it is to acknowledge that

our project must operate within some productive limits, while also in the process putting texts with shared visual techniques, thematic interests, and political concerns into conversation with each other. In particular, we have focused on work that might pivot refugee comics studies away from individual trauma narratives and towards a focus on the grounds for these experiences: the system of racial capitalism and the violent legacies of European colonialism, and the visual regimes that obscure or mediate these structural forces for citizen-viewers. While *Graphic Refuge* hopes to consolidate and strengthen a young yet quickly growing field in comics studies, our aim is in no way to delimit its scope or define its borders. On the contrary, our priority is to begin new conversations by drawing connections and correlations, to increase the cultural and critical visibility of the field of refugee comics studies, and to open up avenues for further research for fellow scholars and their students.

Within these parameters, this book covers a wide range of artists, illustrators, and cartoonists, from a variety of regions and nations. Some are celebrated comics authors widely known for their work in this and other genres (Joe Sacco, Olivier Kugler, Sarah Glidden, Leila Abdelrazaq, Molly Crabapple, Thi Bui), while others have received less critical attention to date (Jeff Pourquié, Don Brown, Jasper Rietman, Brick, Hamid Sulaiman, Marwa Al-Sabouni, and Matt Huynh, among others). *Graphic Refuge* includes analyses of several comics projects co-produced with journalists, activists, non-governmental organisations, and refugees themselves, and it looks to illustrated memoirs as well as digital and online interactive comics in addition to more traditional print comics. Across these forms and platforms, we pay particular attention to some of the more radical outliers in refugee comics where experiments in form, style, layout, and narration offer new and complex ways of seeing refugees and listening to refugee voices. By reading and thinking with these multimodal texts, we emphasise the role that refugee comics can play in dismantling

racialised and colonial constructions of the category “refugee”, and innovating in that space new forms of political recognition and ways of seeing refugees.

Refugee comics studies has grown since the early 2010s through a variety of publications on landmark nonfiction graphic narratives. Just some of the most notable contributions include discussions of Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (2001; see Scherr, Shay, Whitlock), G.B. Tran’s *Vietnamerica: A Family’s Journey* (2010; see Davis, Goodwin, Lee), Leila Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi* (2015; see Banerjee, Cheurfa, El-Eid); Kate Evans’s *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (2017; see Nijdam, Oddenino, Dragoş and Precup), and Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do* (2017; see McWilliams, Miron, Oh), as well as more experimental works, such as Nick Olle and Sam Wallman’s online “At Work Inside Our Detention Centres: A Guard’s Story” (2014; see Humphrey, Nabizadeh) and Tings Chak’s hybrid graphic narrative/architectural treatise *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention* (2017; see Davies, Nayar, Rifkind). While in this book we build on this work by focusing primarily on the nonfiction genres of comics journalism and graphic memoir, we also acknowledge the limits of the documentary in our discussions of some wholly fictional refugee comics, as well as those that combine documentary narratives with genre elements, such as gothic, speculative, or frontier western imagery. In these discussions, we recognise the important body of work on Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* and the broad scholarly interest in this wordless, fantastical graphic narrative’s portrayal of migrant experiences of flight and settlement (2007; Banerjee, Dalmaso and Madella, Rizzi). We are also indebted to a number of recent essay collections that have appeared in refugee comics and adjacent fields, including *Comics and Migration: Representation and Other Practices* (Kauranen et al., eds., 2023), *Refugee Genres: Essays on the Culture of Flight and Refuge* (Frangos and Ghose, eds., 2023), and *The Routledge Handbook of Refugee Narratives* (Espiritu and Nguyen, eds., 2023). We follow paths charted by critics who have explored the relationships between

representation, advocacy, ethics, and empathy in nonfiction comics more broadly, and throughout this project we draw on specific readings and wider frameworks proposed by scholars such as Hillary Chute, Nina Mickwitz, Rebecca Scherr, and Gillian Whitlock, among others.

In writing about refugee comics primarily published since 2015, we are at once aware of the newness of this relative “boom” in the field and conscious that refugee comics have always been at the heart of the alternative comics canon. In particular, we refer at various points to Art Spiegelman’s *The Complete Maus* (2003), Marjane Satrapi’s *Complete Persepolis* (2003), and Joe Sacco’s *Palestine Collection* (2001), as landmark texts that have generated an important body of scholarly criticism. However, where much of the existing work on refugee comics (including our own) has been subsumed into comics studies’ long-running preoccupations with trauma theory and documentary form, this book makes a point of reading refugee comics specifically in relation to critical refugee studies and other relevant fields in the humanities and social sciences. These include camp studies, deportation studies, infrastructure and urban studies, game studies, decolonial architecture theory, and postcolonial and critical race theory, among others. In so doing, this book also challenges some of the orthodoxies of comics studies, even at its relatively early stage of development, questioning the dominant tendency both to read for trauma and to privilege auteurist, hand-drawn autobiographical comics at the centre of the alternative comics canon.

In addition to these wider disciplinary influences, we also aim to better understand the cultural brevity and depth of today’s refugee comics by placing them in a range of visual contexts, including those of surveillance apparatuses, detention camps, national and international legal regimes, forensics and counter-forensics, (neo)colonial and imperial histories, practices of embedded journalism, diasporic entanglements, the automation of remote warfare, and the gamification of empathy. Situating refugee comics in this thick

tapestry of visual “threads”, as refugee comics artist Kate Evans describes them, allows us to read for graphic narrative’s political potential, but also to acknowledge its limitations.

Throughout, we retain a critical engagement with the field of refugee comics as it begins to harden into a series of tropes and conventions that, however well-intentioned, risks producing stereotypes of its own. Our theoretical grounding in feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial studies in particular allows us to challenge ideas of the “worthy” or “grateful” refugee, as well as images of “sentimental humanitarianism” that have exacerbated the hegemonic, anti-migrant narratives of refugees as a burden in need of rescue and resettlement. In line with this approach, throughout the book we also insist on placing refugee comics in the context of longer histories of European colonialism and racial capitalism.

Graphic Refuge: Reading Refugee Refusals

By attending to these different cultural geographies, border infrastructures, and refugee experiences we hope to move beyond one issue in particular that has hitherto been of central concern in refugee comics scholarship: the different meanings and possibilities of *empathy* as it is or is not mobilised by refugee comics. As Anne Vuorinne and Ralf Kauranen describe in their introduction to *Comics & Migration*, “discussions about comics’ transitive potential have most often been concerned with comics’ capacities to invite empathy with migrants – that is, experiences of identification, recognition, and/or affective resonance – in their readers” (2023, 19; see also Scherr 2015). This has made for evocative and powerful readings of the many techniques used by comics artists to hail the attention of their implied citizen-viewers and communicate to them the humanity of their refugee interviewees and migrant protagonists. It has also produced persuasive discussions of refugee comics in relation to human rights as universal ideals that should compensate for the selective and unequal rights

of citizenship status (see, for instance, Salmi 2016; Nayar 2021; Michael 2023). This has produced more expansive definitions of empathy that push the boundaries of what it might mean to imagine and feel solidarity with refugees (Nikkilä & Vuorinne 2020), and it has led others to call for an outright rejection of empathy in favour of an emancipatory politics of the stranger instead (Davies 2019, 2020).

With this book we aim to add to this rich body of scholarship by working out a slightly different line of inquiry, one that is not so contingent on the question of readerly empathy and is instead informed by evolving conversations in critical refugee studies, as we have already noted. Importantly, these debates have themselves emerged in response to the fallout of the 2015 refugee “crisis,” just as the production and circulation of comics telling refugee stories started to increase significantly. Through analyses of the heightened visualisation of refugees in media and political discourse that followed this moment, scholars have shown that such images tend to focus on the spectacle of refugee bodies often caught in boats or breaching territorial edge-markers such as fences, walls, and coastlines. These images circulate in two dominant typologies that are ostensibly opposed to one another, but which in fact limit the scope of possible political action: in the first, migrants are either “massified” as an indistinguishable “flood” of usually passive (though sometimes threatening or criminalised) bodies, while in the second they are “individualised,” with the face of the refugee (and more often the refugee child) offered up to the viewer to provoke empathetic engagement and humanitarian action (Falk 2012; Chouliaraki & Georgiou 2020). Refugee comics have often been discussed in the latter’s ethical register, partly because the notion of the cartoon “face” as a point of readerly identification has deep – though not unchallenged – roots in the earliest theories of graphic narrative (McCloud 1994; Flowers 2020).

However, scholars and practitioners have consistently argued that this humanitarian focus on the face does little to restore power or agency to the refugee (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

2016; Giubilaro 2018). Instead, it reinforces the notion that hospitality towards migrants is a purely ethical issue to be troubled over in the implicitly liberal conscience of the citizen-viewer. The result, argues the political theorist Ida Danewid, is to turn imperative “questions of responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform into matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality” (2017, 1675). This sublimation of political accountability into ethical quandary does little to challenge dominant visual regimes that decide which migrants “count” as refugees, just as they also determine the bodies that are worth “counting” when migrant lives are lost to violent borders. As Nadine El-Enany asks of the short-lived wave of pro-migrant sentiment that spread across Europe in the wake of the 2015 photograph of Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi: “What of the bearded male refugee? What of the woman in the hijab or burka? What of their dark-skinned children?” (2016, 14). Elsewhere, Yousif Qasmiyeh and Odile Amman follow this humanitarian way of seeing through to its logical endpoint: “What if the refugee were born without a face?” (2017).

With these critiques in mind, we aim with this book to move discussions of refugee comics beyond a humanitarian register that tends to present the rescue of the disenfranchised non-citizen as an ethical challenge for the implicitly benevolent and empathetic citizen-viewer. This limited way of seeing not only overlooks much of the actual content of existing refugee comics, which often spend more energy on depictions of the landscapes traversed and conditions endured by migrants than the “humanising” faces of individual refugees. By revolving around “our” recognition of “their” humanity, it also simplifies the dialectical relationship between citizen-viewer and refugee subject, in the process obscuring the differentiated experiences and decisive agencies of those seeking refuge. This way of seeing is baked into the legal structure of asylum: as Lynda Mannik points out, by insisting that the so-called “authentic” or “true” refugee would only flee their country if they genuinely had no other choice, the humanitarian gaze interprets any form of migrant agency “as detrimental to

the attainment of refugee status” (2016, 8). This limits “refuge” to a juridical-political category that can in the end only be “recognised” by the very national and supranational states that so often aim to exclude those same migrants from the privileges of citizenship. Refugee agency and refugee status become incompatible categories under this rubric, reducing the figure of the refugee to little more than a passive vessel for state benevolence or cruelty. In this book, we therefore turn away from ideas of “refuge” that are limited to the recognition of a person’s citizen or human rights by state power, and instead follow Vinh Nguyen’s description of *refugeetude* as a kind of refuge consciousness: “a way of being (an *ethos*) that does not acquiesce to the entrenched global order structured by forms of racial, capital, and mobile inequality” (2023, 111).

This shift in our basic understanding of what “refuge” is and might be has profound consequences for the way we read refugee comics. Rather than approaching them for their “humanising” or “rights-giving” potential, we explore the ways in which graphic narratives are instead able to register acts of refugee refusal. By attending to the representation of material practices such as refusals in comics – for instance, when migrants refuse to claim asylum in their first European country of arrival, as required by the Dublin Regulation, or when they refuse to tell journalists or bureaucrats what they want to hear – then we begin to switch out of a bordered visuality and into a more decolonised way of seeing. As scholars have shown, migrants practically and repeatedly refuse the idea that freedom of movement is a right to be granted by a nation-state through the allocation of citizenship or asylum (or to be benevolently gifted by the ethically minded liberal). They make this refusal everyday by enacting their freedom of movement *regardless* of whether their “status” is “recognised” or not (De Genova & Peutz 2010, 8-9, 13; Tazzioli 2019, 151). It is our argument here that while refugee comics might sometimes play into humanitarian schemas of recognition, they can also and more productively be seen to recognise migration as an act of *disregard*, one

that might in turn encourage readers themselves to *re-cognise* – to literally rethink or reevaluate – their *own* situation as citizen-viewers.

The political theorist Patchen Markell’s reflections on recognition and refusal are helpful here. For Markell, “the pursuit of recognition involves a ‘misrecognition’ of a different and deeper kind: not the misrecognition of an identity, either one’s own or someone else’s, but the misrecognition of one’s own fundamental *situation* or circumstances” (2003, 5, our emphasis). The question as to whether comics help readers to recognise the refugee’s “right” to movement and shelter does little to unsettle the power of the viewer or make them conscious of their own subject position. This is antithetical to “refuge” as we use it here, which to turn again to Nguyen is defined by the ability “to see one’s *situation*, and identify sources of violence and injustice that have shaped one’s (as well others’) coming into being” (2023, 111, our emphasis). To reach for the “graphic refuge” we refer to in the title of this book, we must ask a different question: *how do comics help readers to recognise the refugee’s movement as a pre-emptive refusal of borders and a determination to enact their right to life for themselves?* This reevaluation of recognition requires a visual reorientation that turns away from the humanising images of refugees and looks instead at the current agents of visibility: those who surveil migrants in camps, on oceans, in border zones, and other carceral spaces, often leaving them there to die nonetheless. This has been the critical aim of several artistic responses to migrancy in recent years (see, for instance, Mathur 2011; Mazzara 2019), and it is our contention here that refugee comics are also up to the challenge.

As we have intimated throughout this introduction, this re-evaluation of refugee comics moves us away from the unidirectional viewing of migrants by those secure in their citizenship, and towards more intense scrutiny of the interdependent relationship through which citizens and non-citizens are mutually constructed. W.J.T. Mitchell puts it simply enough: any attempt to counter the illegalisation of migrants must not simply challenge “the

way people see immigrants, but the way they see themselves” (2011, 74). Only this perceptual shift, he continues, will allow for “the production of new, self-generated images and words to articulate the common interests of immigrants, both legal and illegal... to generate new *situations* and performances, from the immediacy of the mass assembly to the staging of events for the mass media” (2011, 74, our emphasis). The word Mitchell shares with both Markell and Nguyen here is *situation*, a crucial term that threads together the many readings of refugee comics discussed in the chapters that follow. From boat crossings and refugee camps to war-torn landscapes and second-generation narratives, the comics addressed in this book are at their most powerful when they allow citizen-viewers to perceive their own situated relationship with refugee subjects, not as some ethical abstraction, but as a set of political decisions and historical forces that have driven mass displacement and produced a world of visibility, mobility, and carcerality. Insofar as our readings of these graphic narratives push against legal definitions of “refugee rights” and reach for this wider historical consciousness of what it might mean to find refuge in the present, it may be more accurate to speak not of refugee comics but of *refuge comics*, an argument we will return to in the book’s epilogue.

Chapter Overview

After this collaboratively authored introduction, the six chapters that follow are written alternately by each of us in turn. Nonetheless, while we have pursued individual lines of inquiry and selected texts according to our specific interests for each chapter, our compositional process has involved multiple readings and rereadings of one another’s work, and we hope that the result is a series of in-depth studies that build into something more than

the sum of their parts. To affirm this collaborative ethos, we concluded the book with a short, co-authored Epilogue.

In Chapter One, “Clandestine Crossings: Refugee Comics at Sea,” Davies turns to graphic narratives that depict migrant crossings of the Mediterranean. While many refugee comics are read with the conventional documentary aim of correcting negative representations of migration with more “positive” narratives, the stakes change in the context of clandestine crossings, where even images made with humanitarian intent are often used to “capture” refugees and subject them to scrutiny. Through analyses of several artworks including Joe Sacco’s “The Unwanted,” webcomics by PositiveNegatives, and collaborative projects by Jeff Pourquié and Tania Tervonen, the chapter develops an understanding of graphic narrative as a counter forensic practice that is able to turn the surveillant gaze back on state actors and border agencies, holding them to account without infringing on migrant clandestinity. Pointing to this “subaltern resolution” and reading it through decolonial and abolitionist methodologies, Davies argues that the many drawings of the sea in these comics join the immediate experiences of individual refugees to much longer global histories of forced displacement and oceanic spaces.

In Chapter Two, “Refugee Camp Comics and the Postdocumentary Turn,” Rifkind turns to recent print refugee camp comics that make visible the contradictions between humanitarian assistance and carceral control. Understanding the field of refugee camp comics through postcolonial and carceral architectural theory, the chapter argues that comics can make visible the genealogies of refugee camps in European colonialism’s establishment of border zones and detention centres to contain the racialised other. The chapter analyses two graphic narratives by western artists based on their visits to camps for asylum seekers: *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* (2018) by Don Brown and *Escaping Wars and Waves: Encounters with Syrian Refugees* (2018) by Olivier Kugler. Rifkind introduces the

term “refugeeness” to understand the ambivalent political subjectivities depicted in these graphic narratives, where it is at once politically necessary for residents to identify with the category of “the refugee” to receive protection and at the same time subjectively dissonant to see the self as “the refugee.” Through these readings and a theoretical approach adapted from documentary comics studies and postdocumentary photography theory, Rifkind argues that the counter forensics of refugee camp comics make visible the historical and contemporary logics of colonialism, surveillance, and the securitisation of borders.

In Chapter Three, “Unknown Knowns: Refugee Comics and the War on Terror,” Davies puts Sarah Glidden’s long form work of comics journalism, *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq* (2016), in conversation with theoretical work by Walter Benjamin. Through this dialogue the chapter explores how, since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, an increased visibility of and proximity to atrocity has not mobilised widespread dissent, but rather worked in the political favour of those responsible for imperialist violence. Reading *Rolling Blackouts* as resistance to the war on terror’s aggressive visuality, from the interrogations of occupying forces and border agencies to interviews in asylum screenings and with western journalists, the chapter shows how Glidden’s comic creates space for refugees to assert the right to remain “unknown” or to be “known” only insofar as it is useful to them. Through these refugee refusals, Davies argues, Glidden asserts a contemplative “thinking-in-images” that allows citizen-viewers to dis-embed themselves from the paralysing position of the implicated yet disenfranchised witness.

In Chapter Four, “Interactive Refugee Comics and Digital Humanitarianism,” Rifkind draws on digital comics theory, game theory, and critical refugee studies to look at how interactive digital refugee comics try to construct an intimate relation between self and other by drawing the citizen-viewer into refugee virtual spaces. Two fictional online projects are central to this analysis: Jasper Rietman’s adaptation of his wordless graphic narrative *Exodus*

(2018) into an interactive 3D motion comic, and *Sea Prayer* (2017), a 360-degree interactive fictional animation based on the death of Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi. Rifkind contrasts the counter forensic strategies of these two projects by studying how one zooms out to show the scale of human displacement and environmental ruin, while the other zooms in to reveal the intimate memories and hopes of a specific refugee subject. The chapter concludes with a discussion of digital humanitarianism and the “tech for good” movement to flag that many of the same technologies of seeing used in interactive refugee comics are used by surveillance and security regimes. Rifkind concludes that interactive refugee comics need to be approached critically. On the one hand, they are an accessible, innovative extension of print refugee comics that have the potential to reach new audiences. On the other hand, they further complicate questions about witnessing, othering, and solidarity that have already been posed by studies of print refugee narratives.

In Chapter Five, “Remote Sensing: Refugee Comics in Ruins,” Davies asks how comics have responded to a militarised and networked visual culture where the act of seeing or witnessing has become synonymous with shooting and even killing. Epitomised in the phenomenon of drone warfare, the chapter reads this deadly visuality in several graphic narratives about the Syrian conflict: Audrey Quinn and Jackie Roche’s webcomic “Syria’s Climate Conflict” (2014), Brick’s comics pamphlet *East of Aleppo: Bread, Bombs, and Video Clips* (2017), Hamid Sulaiman’s graphic novel *Freedom Hospital* (2017), and two illustrated memoirs, Marwa al-Sabouni’s *The Battle for Home* (2017) and Marwan Hisham and Molly Crabapple’s *Brothers of the Gun* (2018). The Syrian War was the first to combine smartphones with social media to turn images into weapons, fundamentally altering the context in which refugee comics are read. By joining these developments in digital media to very material scenes of domicile and ruined infrastructure in Syrian cities, Davies shows how refugee comics have challenged conventional associations of distance with dehumanisation to

make space for readers to bear witness without the immediacy of physical touch. Through this “remote sensing,” Davies concludes, refugee comics extend the territorial limits of “home” and begin to build newly intimate solidarities across borders.

In Chapter Six, “Diasporic Displacements: Second-Generation Refugee Comics,” Rifkind uses Vinh Nguyen’s term “refugeetude” to study three print comics by children of refugees that highlight the enduring conditions of the refugee experience across time, space, and generations. This chapter explores representations of refugeetude in three different diasporic contexts: Leila Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi* (2015), a graphic auto/biography of her Palestinian father’s refugee camp childhood drawn from her position in the United States; Thi Bui’s graphic memoir of her family’s escape from Vietnam and ultimate refuge in the United States, *The Best We Could Do* (2017); and Matt Huynh’s short comic, “Cabramatta” (2019), about his family’s post-Vietnam War settlement in an Australian suburb. Rifkind analyses these three comics through the lenses of life writing theory, diasporic studies, and feminist refugee epistemology to see how second-generation refugee artists draw themselves into the frames and panels of their parents’ stories. Despite their different historical and political situations, these three comics refute sentimental clichés of the refugee child as the epitome of abjection and helplessness to construct them as agents of their own lives instead. Rifkind continues the book’s focus on the spaces and structures that construct the refugee subject by analysing the complex sites of home, and the relationships between private and public spaces, that shape these artists’ memories of their families’ experiences of arrival and settlement. The chapter concludes that graphic narratives hold the potential of refuge for second-generation refugee artists because comics are a form particularly capable of capturing the layered displacements and emplacements of refugeetude.

Finally, we conclude the book with a short, collaboratively authored Epilogue that looks to the wave of short comics that were published by artists on social media in response

to the devastating assault on Gaza in the autumn of 2023. We point to this particularly violent and visible moment of conflict, human displacement, and comics production because it exemplifies the more expansive idea of “graphic refuge” that we push for throughout the book as a whole. Moving beyond understandings of comics as straightforward pleas for the recognition of migrant rights by readers already secure in their citizenship status, we suggest the concept of “refuge comics” to refer to graphic narratives that bring into view the wider situation in which both citizen-viewers and refugee subjects find themselves. In conclusion, we argue that it is this different way of looking that might yet advance the conditions needed for refuge as a lived experience and political relationship.