

Introduction: Discursive Contexts, “Voice,” and Empathy in Graphic Life Narratives of Migration and Exile

By Nina Mickwitz

Many contemporary “refugee stories” in comics form draw on broader traditions of advocacy and the construction of issue-based publics organized around the production of readerly empathy. Advocacy suggests speaking on behalf of or in solidarity with someone who is not able to speak for themselves; advocacy, is motivated by an ethical response, and is, presumably, intended to support or effect social change. Historically, advocacy has incorporated a variety of mediated “speech”: prose and poetry; still images, photographic or otherwise; and audiovisual and moving-image forms. Yet there is a tendency to celebrate the affordances of comics for offering something new and unique to the mediation of such issues. The formal construction of comics has been described as acutely congruent with witnessing and trauma, and has been credited with inviting readerly positions that are “ethically nuanced.”¹

The contributions in this Forum show that graphic narrative does offer a capacity for narrative complexity, temporal simultaneity, shifting focalization, visual metaphors, and rhetorical opportunities, such as the deliberate incongruity between text and image. In her contribution on the Australian cartoonist Safdar Ahmed, Golnar Nabizadeh describes these affordances with eloquence, especially comics’ collaborative potential to produce an “‘intra-archive’ of communal memories and remembrance” between subject and witness. But such qualities require consideration on a case-by-case basis, rather than being presumed to be characterizing traits of all comics, or even comics addressing social inequalities such as displacement and precarity. Examples demonstrating that graphic narrative is as capable of crudity as it is of nuance are easily found, and comics have historically been employed to propagate any number of ideological positions. Dragos Manea and Mihaela Precup productively expand on these issues in their attentive discussion of Kate Evans’s *Threads*. Their reading of Evans’s privileging of her own perspective, and elision of those that might make her refugee subjects less empathetic to Western readers, highlights the need for critical attention to the ideologies embedded in refugee comics.

Underlining the vital task of examining structures, tropes, and approaches to agency and “voice,” Jacques Rancière has posited that “[t]he arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation.”² This, of course, makes consideration of factors beyond the textual no less urgent, because their contexts of production and intended readerships are crucial components in terms of what these comics do and how they operate. These contexts include relations between subjects, creators, publishers, funding bodies, readers, and critics. Crucially, they also involve power differentials, and my intention here is to sketch some of these concerns. But first, a brief acknowledgement of the difficulty in determining “refugee comics” as a category.

In front of me at the time of writing, I have two very different journey narratives-cum-comic books about forced migration: Eoin Colfer, Andrew Donkin, and Giovanni Rigano’s *Illegal: A Graphic Novel Telling One Boy’s Epic Journey to Europe* (2017) and Ken Krimstein’s *The Three Escapes of Hannah Arendt: A Tyranny of Truth* (2018). *Illegal* is the story of a child refugee, following the journey of the composite character, Edo, from destitute existence in a village to the Libyan coast and across the Mediterranean into Europe. After various setbacks, suffering, and the tragic loss of his older brother to the sea, a happy resolution is provided by a reunion with Edo’s sister. In line with fairly typical humanitarian advocacy tropes, Edo’s story represents the plight of thousands of migrants and refugees seeking entry to Europe by offering a point of empathic connection. His victimhood is undeserved and caused by circumstances beyond his control, and his vulnerability and suffering as a small child underline an appeal made in the name of universal human rights. As a particularly “deserving” refugee protagonist, Edo makes a familiar figure, and we see similar types in Evans’s *Threads*. The structure of the story could equally be described as fairly traditional, beginning with a brief exposition of the conditions that lead to Edo’s journey, with the journey itself involving a series of complications and reversals, and eventually leading to a reassuring conclusion. Nevertheless, the deployment of emotive visual strategies and melodrama to invite an affective connection and solidarity between distant audiences (or, in this case, readers) can do important work and should not necessarily be dismissed.³

Krimstein's graphic biography about Hannah Arendt is likewise structured as a journey of displacement while simultaneously functioning as a journey of becoming. While this work is not strictly an example of advocacy, the significance of Arendt is nevertheless poignant in relation to contemporary graphic narratives about forced migration—Arendt was a refugee and her writing on political agency and judgement has been a notable influence in Western political theory. Consequently, this comic book fits a particular historical understanding of biography as a chronicle of a person of cultural importance. While Krimstein's Arendt is historical, specific, and extraordinary, Colfer, Donkin, and Rigano's Edo is a composite construct, personifying and making visible the suffering of the many in order to generate an empathetic and ethical response. Yet, in their profoundly different ways, both stories point to the issue of "voice": What is it to speak with (as in alongside) and for someone else?⁴

"Voice"

Social-documentary practices, campaigning, and much investigative journalism, advocacy, and ethnography feature the intention to "extend a voice" to others, especially those with restricted or no access to means of production and platforms that enable asserting one's subjectivity. This involves asserting validity to particular subject positions, but does not necessarily challenge the reproduction of simplistic victim tropes. Forced displacement and asylum claims present particularly complex mechanisms in relation to speech, victimhood, and voice.⁵ For instance, being required to present and reproduce repeated accounts of circumstances and victimhood as part of bureaucratic processes to secure various degrees of legal status does not constitute a voice.

Karrie Fransman's *Over Under Sideways Down* for the Red Cross shows a teenage protagonist, Ebrahim, undergoing this very process.⁶ Like *Illegal*, it presents a victim narrative with a young and vulnerable protagonist. Ebrahim, however, is not a composite person; he is an actual person. This by itself does not alter the fact that both stories present a young protagonist to make a case on behalf of a larger group of people. A more significant difference, however, is that *Over Under Sideways Down* does address the continued challenges that face those without documentation or sanctioned status once reaching their desired destinations. Here, the individual's story becomes entwined with political and systemic dimensions in order to invite not just humanitarian sympathy and solidarity, but also "critical witnessing."⁷ A now well-established model for producing "critical witnessing" in graphic narrative form has been prominently deployed by

cartoonists such as Joe Sacco, Sarah Glidden, and Kate Evans, among others. This involves a creator character whose own experiences form the central narrative device, and focalization has emerged combining (often self-reflexive) first-person testimonial with the role of facilitating and representing the witness accounts of subjects.

Collaborative practice can, of course, extend beyond gathering and giving testimonies by others in visual form. As discussed in Nabizadeh's contribution, the work of the Refugee Art Project in Sydney, Australia, disrupts and circumvents the interpretive filter constituted by the professional cartoonist. By foregrounding the subjectivity of subjects more directly, this work draws attention to the dynamics of power that constitute practices of representation. Performing in a capacity of validation and advocacy is clearly at the heart of all these different approaches. Ultimately, however, the agency of subjects will depend on the extent to which they are able to assert editorial control over the works that represent them. In all of these cases, concerns of ethical representation and production interweave with the ambition to generate an empathic response. This ambition, and indeed the very notion of empathy, directs us toward readers. Whose attention is being sought and to what effect are they being addressed and interpellated? How close to, or distant from, the issues at stake are these readers? What kinds of issue-based publics or counterpublics might they construct? Will their empathic engagements translate into social action or political leverage? With attention shifting toward imagined readers, it also becomes prudent to acknowledge how "serious" topics in comics work as a marker of prestige for a formerly (and some-times still) derided cultural form. Rather than external or removed, scholarship is clearly an integral part of such questions

Contexts

Claims for the cultural value of comics are implicitly doubled by the combination of scholarly interest and "serious" subject matter. I have overheard suggestions that (a) the field of comics studies is now becoming more trained on "serious" comics and topics and that (b) this can be interpreted as a sign of maturation. This rather problematically implies that fictional constructs are incompatible with deep engagements with real-world issues, and implies a dismissal of substantive areas of comics research as well as readerships. Traversing a range of faculties and disciplines, comics studies has perhaps reached a certain point of maturation, but this is evidenced precisely by its encompassing diverse interests and approaches. This means that we need to be cautious about extending or transferring the critical points about specific kinds of comics into claims about comics and or the study of comics more generally.

When tackling the topic of forced migration and positing counternarratives to institutional and news media discourse, both comics' position as other and the multimodality of the form underwrite their appeal and potential to produce empathy and advocacy. Comics as a vehicle for revisionist histories and counternarratives in the present owes its dues to underground comix—to authorial and small-press practices and a certain stance rooted in dissent. Comics simultaneously allow for extended narratives that can act as counterpoints to decontextualized, single images and the soundbite simplicity of rolling news headlines. Maria Fernanda Diaz-Basteris's contribution to this Forum highlights how crisis and catastrophe become high-impact media "events" that belie the long-term duration of the consequences and the painstaking processes of rebuilding that face those directly affected. Her work on Puerto Rican online comics shows comics as a tool for self-determined media production and a means of countering mass media tropes of suffering that deny both individual specificity and context. The strategic use of personal stories that is prevalent in comics representing migrants and refugees can, moreover, counter both media and institutional representation that dehumanizes in order to serve political agendas. As media and mediation processes constitute everyday life, lived experience seems to be increasingly heightened and valorized as a guarantor of knowledge. This, too, buttresses the authenticating and testimonial function of the individual's story.

The individual's story presents the pivotal connection between autobiographical traditions in comics and advocacy and campaigns to raise awareness, be it in relation to health or to other social issues and inequalities. And, as Rebecca Scherr points out in her contribution to this Forum, an emphasis on the experiential and embodied, and on the capacity of comics to make such dimensions available, has been a recurrent theme in comics scholarship (my own included). Scherr's attention to "the ground" is important, not least in its theoretical implications, because a focus on individual experience can obscure political and systemic dimensions in ways that effectively work counter to the project of addressing social injustices. The individual's story, a trope dominant to the point of seeming inevitable or "natural," thus involves an intriguing paradox. While long a powerful tool for otherwise silenced or marginalized subjects, it also aligns rather neatly with the individualist ethos of neoliberal ideology. If empathy is posited as "an understanding of affective and ethical response that does not substitute for sociopolitical action but instead is viably articulated with it," then wider structural and systemic impacts and causes also demand some address.⁸

As both Diaz-Basteris's and Scherr's attention to ruins and rubble shows, cartoonists' representations of the physical spaces inhabited by displaced people can exceed the frame of individual stories.

Comics and graphic narratives that adopt a highly personal perspective to represent or speak on behalf of groups suffering social injustice seem to be attractive to large publishing houses (meaning high production values, mainstream outlets, and critical attention) and scholars alike. Bringing these kinds of stories to wider readerships indeed aligns perfectly well with their function as advocacy. However, by scrutinizing the infantilization of the male refugee in *Threads*, Manea and Precup reveal how the ideological work of producing an empathetic refugee subject may yield its own set of ethical problems. Scherr approaches the topic of ethics and empathy from a different angle, asking how studying the ground rather than the figure of graphic life narratives might produce an adjacent, yet different, form of empathy. Diaz-Basteris's research takes us into the field itself to retrain Western attention to comics and production cultures that emerge from the very Puerto Rican communities they seek to represent, and to remind us of the important role of web comics. Nabizadeh's discussion of the Australian Refugee Art Project likewise intersects with these concerns and reminds us that comics are a fertile form for collaboration and the multiplicity of voice. Perhaps this work can help determine where the politics of asserting "a voice" emerges as distinct from extending "a voice."

Notes

1. Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 34–35; Polak, *Ethics in the Gutter*, 14.
2. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 19.
3. Wells, "Melodrama," 288–291.
4. Ruby, "Speaking For."
5. Goheen Glanville, "Refracting Exoticism," 237–239.
6. Fransman's project, commissioned by the Red Cross for Refugee Week, is the most direct example of advocacy here, whereas *Illegal* presents as a simultaneously educational and authorial publication.
7. Zembylas, "Witnessing in the Classroom," 319.
8. LaCapra, *History in Transit*, 77.

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