CHAPTER 16

Comics Telling Refugee Stories

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Introduction: 'Refugee Comics'

This chapter considers how comics have asserted their presence as a vehicle for advocacy and representation in the context of the contemporary 'refugee crisis'. It adopts a survey approach in order to recognize both patterns and differences. Such a sweeping glance will inevitably lead to omissions, and even those comics mentioned will arguably not be afforded the full attention they deserve. Yet, taking into account a greater number of examples is necessary in order to answer the question underpinning this chapter: *if* such a category is a tenable proposition, what constitutes 'refugee comics'?

The first concern raised by this categorization relates to the political dimensions of language, and the need for careful attention to expressions and terminology. The ongoing global 'crisis' of forced migration and displacement of people is undeniably a crisis for nation-states politically, in terms of infrastructural support, social and public services, and so on. The commonplace framing of the consequences thereof as a *humanitarian* crisis presents a necessary call to action, then, but tends to obscure specific

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D. Davies, C. Rifkind (eds.), *Documenting Trauma in Comics*,
Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37998-8_16

political causes and the failings—not to mention violent actions—of nation-states (see Malkki 1996: 378). Conjuring a sense of both urgency and trauma, 'crisis' might correlate to rupture and loss experienced by individuals, families, and communities. But the word does little to capture the permanence of life in refugee camps, the legal and socio-cultural impacts that span generations, or the character of the contemporary 'refugee crisis' as a persistent state of affairs.

Labels such as 'migrant', 'refugee', and 'asylum seeker' likewise struggle to adequately account for the complex causes and mutable patterns of forced migration. Instead, such labels instil hierarchies as part of wider attempts to 'regulate, discriminate and differentiate' (Zetter 2007: 189). Where 'refugee' status was originally set out in response to the extensive displacement of people worldwide after World War 2, the more recent term 'asylum seeker' has come to be associated with a provisional precarity and the reduction of juridical rights. The term 'forced migrant' might more accurately encapsulate the numerous contributing factors of war, political persecution, and socio-economic discrimination that contribute to the displacement of people. However, as Roger Zetter points out, it also 'reduces the focus on protection as the fundamental right of a refugee enshrined in the Geneva Convention' (189). Throughout this chapter, I will therefore use the term refugee, even when referring to people who are undocumented and unregistered. The only exception I will make is for the assignation 'asylum seeker' in discussions of comics specifically about the often extended and drawn out situation of processing claims for refugee status.

The aim of this chapter is not simply to create an inventory of comics addressing the 'refugee crisis'. Rather, by accounting for varied approaches, processes, and perspectives, I hope through these comparisons to open up questions of intention. The chapter's main discussion is thus prefaced by an initial survey of comics addressing forced migration and refugees. This is followed by a consideration of how comics can be situated (as representations, counter-representations, or advocacy tools) within a wider context of media representations of refugees. I propose that longstanding aesthetic and socio-political traditions of comics are contributing factors, and that the more recent and prominent trends of autobiographical and trauma narratives make comics well placed to counter the tendencies of news media and policy debates that render the individual experiences of refugees invisible. Often used by charities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the individual's story is commonly mobilized as an effective

entry point and strategy for raising awareness.[1] Yet, we need to acknowledge that such positive representations can be complicit in the reproduction of victim tropes (Pupavac 2008) and to recognize the depoliticizing aspects of human-interest advocacy (Rosler 2004). Tracking critical debates concerning advocacy and representation as they pertain to 'refugee comics' demands a shift in focus to the role of authorship and publishing contexts. The chapter aims therefore to set out the constitutive links between subjects, creators, and readers, and other different interests brought into play by comics addressing the contemporary refugee crisis.

Examples and Approaches

Comics' capacity to reach diverse readerships, and effectively combine immediacy with intimacy, has not gone unnoticed by public agencies. Published and circulated by the Australian border agency, the *No Way* comic (2014) was part of an ongoing campaign to deter potential asylum seekers from heading for Australia across the Pacific Ocean. Aaron Humphrey, noting how its presentation and visual style resembles airline safety instructions, points out how the webcomic carefully 'elides crucial details about the government's policies while suggesting (but never directly stating) its disregard for the human rights of asylum seekers' (2017: 1). Equally controversial, the comic *Germany and its People* (2015) was published by the regional German public service broadcaster, Bayerischer Rundfunk (BRF). As for *No Way*, *Germany and Its People* has the look of instructional comics, further underlined by its truncated episodic structure. With little attention to context, explanation, or nuance, this comic informs new arrivals of cultural codes by setting up crude delineations between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' behaviours. The didactic mode of both comics is communicated in a leaden (supposedly dispassionate) realism. While avoiding the visual hyperbole and emotive dynamism associated with propagandistic traditions, both exemplify comics operating as instruments and mouthpieces of power.

However, these are, overall, exceptions. Comics representing refugees and their stories tend more usually to 'speak back' to such power. Such comics, comic books, and graphic novels dealing with the contemporary 'refugee crisis' span a factual-fictional continuum. For instance, the alien

[1] This use of individual narratives to draw attention to wider social issues is similarly evidenced in the recent proliferation of illness narratives.

refugee story in Margaret Stohl's *Mighty Captain Marvel #1* (2016) is representative of the historical tendency of superhero comics to incorporate topical concerns into their fictional worlds. On the other hand, Joshua Dysart's *Living Level 3: Iraq* (2016)—a collaboration with the World Food Programme, published in serial form by the Huffington Post and available online—is grounded firmly in actual locations and events. This fictionalized account, based on observation and interviews, tells a story about humanitarian aid workers and the displaced people they try to help. It uses composite or fictional protagonists to depict and narrate actual events, and does not assume that this strategy necessarily undermines the authenticity or affective power of its work. Biography is a different kind of fact-based form involving varying degrees of interpretational leeway (Schabert 1982). Leila Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi* (2015) tells the story of her father's childhood in the eponymous Palestinian refugee camp in Northern Lebanon, processing both refugee memories and post-memories (Hirsch 1997). This account of a refugee experience asserts its authenticity through familial connection, accounting for historical dimensions while resonating with contemporary political concerns.

On the whole, however, factual approaches to refugee narratives remain the most common. Within these, a distinction can be drawn between comics presenting refugee narratives from the first-person perspective of the refugee and those adopting a journalistic approach. Joe Sacco is an exponent of the latter. In *Palestine* (1993–1995, 1993 and 1996, 2001) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2010), Sacco engages with the immediate realities and generational dimensions of forced displacement, the experience of Palestinian refugees, and the transformations that take place as camps assume permanence. Sacco's *The Unwanted* (2012) examines the realities of undocumented migration across the Mediterranean on Malta, a small island and one of many landing points on the route from North Africa to the European mainland.

Despite her markedly different drawing style and aesthetic, Sarah Glidden follows Sacco's model of investigative journalism, with its analysis of context, background information, and causal relationships, and its explicit foregrounding of the processes of journalistic mediation. Both Sacco and Glidden carefully qualify their claims to factual representation, and go to great lengths to present accurate and specific depictions of the people and places they encounter. Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts* (2016) is based on fieldwork across Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. Her outsider position and perspective functions as a conduit for a readership with no direct

access to the events depicted. This foregrounding of the author's presence and numerous self-reflexive asides form a crucial element of the telling.

Works by Kamal Hakim, Lisa Mandel, Nour Fakhouri, Paula Bulling, and Kate Evans similarly include self-reflexive strategies that critically question their own role as mediators. As contributors to the Meantime project in Lebanon, Fakhouri, Hakim, and Mandel recount meetings with refugees who dream of eventually reaching destinations where they can rebuild lives with a greater sense of permanence and possibility.[2] Mandel has also, like Evans, intercepted testimonies in the unofficial and transitory locations that constitute corridors of movement, while Bulling's *Im Land Der Frühaufsteigers* (*Land of the Early Risers*) (2012) shows how, even after the presumed arrival in host countries, such hopes and dreams can be deferred by the limbo of asylum applications and processing centres.

Fakhouri's softly drawn comic shows her visiting refugees living in Tripoli city, while in 'Aassoun Tower' Hakim brings a more upbeat and humorous tone to its rendering of subjects and encounters as he travels north of Tripoli to an old water tower housing Syrian refugees. In addition to her work for the Meantime project, Mandel has produced the 'chronicle of an investigation', *Les Novelles de la Jungle de Calais* (*News of the Calais Jungle*) (2017), in collaboration with sociologist Yasmine Bouagga. First published as a blog by LeMonde.fr, it has since been brought out in album form by Castermann. *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (2017) by the UK-based Evans is also based on visits to the Calais Jungle, the large and unofficial camp at Calais that was demolished in late October 2016, but that still remains a gathering point for refugees attempting to reach the UK. Early sections of *Threads* similarly first appeared online but were subsequently published as a graphic novel published by Verso. Here, too, a comparative approach immediately highlights how aesthetic and stylistic choices foreground creators' 'voices' as an integral part of the mediating process. Mandel's buoyant black line and cartoony style embody the wit and professional flair of strip cartoons. Eschewing panel borders, she deftly indicates panels by the precise grouping of elements and the inclusion of speech bubbles. In vivid contrast, Evans uses gentler textures by means of colour pencils and watercolour washes. This hand-crafted aesthetic is

[2] The Meantime project was funded by the French NGO Solidarités International publicizing the everyday realities and experiences of Syrian refugees through online comics (http://comics.solidarites.org/en/home), and exhibited in Beirut in February 2017.

further underlined by collaged lace strips that take on the function of gutters, literally and metaphorically replacing borders with interlinked threads.

The emphasis on individual creators' voices through stylistic idiosyncrasies functions as a meta-commentary on the situated-ness of factual accounts, and thus the limitations of claims to their objective reportage. More plainly still, a model of transparency that foregrounds mediators' subjectivity and critically reflects on the processes involved has become a hallmark of comics reporting. Overt signposting of the comics creator's subjectivity can function as a persuasive assurance of earnest intent, and thus undergird (as opposed to undermine) the credibility of an account. This can be an especially useful technique for a form of representation not conventionally associated with gravitas and authority.

Nevertheless, in a number of refugee comics the creator is not represented within the narrative, even if the visual style and aesthetic assert her presence, authorship, and filtering function. This works to more firmly position the refugee subject as the focal point of the account. Examples of professional comics creators collaborating with their subjects in this way include Lena Merhej's 'Where There Is Life, There Is Love', Diala Brisly's fictionalized account of family life 'Our Life in a Tent', and Karrie Fransman's interpretation of a teenage Iranian refugee's testimony in *Over Under Sideways Down* (2016), commissioned by the Red Cross in connection with Refugee Awareness Week.

This approach is also adopted by the PositiveNegatives project. Led by Benjamin Dix and illustrator Lyndsey Pollock, PositiveNegatives 'combine ethnographic research with illustration, adapting personal testimonies into art, education and advocacy materials' (positivenegatives.org). Three distinct stories, each based on the experiences of a Syrian refugee, formed the basis of the exhibition 'A Perilous Journey: Stories of Migration' in Oslo (2015) and London (2017). These comics narratives similarly emphasize personal testimonies and share the visual characteristics of an earlier online project, *Meet the Somalis*. The latter, a collaboration with the Open Society Foundations (OSF), traced different experiences of integration through fifteen stories from seven Northern European cities. The Finnish print anthology *Mitä Sä Täällä teet?* (*What Are You Doing Here?*) (2016) likewise prioritizes narratives of diasporic life, integration, and cultural identity. In this publication, the variety of contributors and styles combine to portray the multiplicity and heterogeneity of migrant and refugee experiences in a host country that has only relatively recently experienced a diversification of its population. The fifteen stories are first-person

accounts, although (with one exception) they are not drawn by the narrators themselves.

Despite these and numerous other variations, an overarching categorization of refugee comics can be drawn based on the narrative and formal techniques I have identified here. Some are journalistic accounts in which, incorporated as character and narrator, the creator takes a central and organizing function. Others position the refugee witness as their main focus. They are all, however, representative of an orientation towards topical and socio-political issues in the contemporary cycle of non-fiction comics, and share a genealogy that includes autobiographical comics and the self-publishing scene.

'Refugee Comics' as Representation

If these narrative approaches offer one possible avenue for the categorization of refugee comics, their publication and funding sources might present another—though the variability of approaches makes a coherent overview problematic. However, thinking about funding streams also raises questions regarding the comics' intended readerships. Who are these comics addressing, and to what ends? One aim is presumably to facilitate a speaking position for refugee experiences. Storytelling is a symbolic resource for gaining recognition for refugee experiences and therefore holds the key to social change (Eastmond 2007: 251). Pramod Nayar has argued for the role of a socio-cultural, rather than strictly political, articulation of social injustice: 'a condition of social and cultural acceptance […] is, indisputably, as central to an individual's sense of selfhood as it is to political citizenship' (2010: 24).

Sometimes therapeutic self-expression is an explicit and central aim of these projects, producing comics about refugee experiences, by refugees. Examples include comics workshops held at the refugee shelter in Berlin in 2015 (see Rebmann 2016), and the An-Najah National University's Graphic Novel Project in Nablus 2013. In other instances, collaboration with professional artists and creators is a key feature. *Going Home Again* and *Home Is Where One Starts From* are comic books for refugee children, produced by International Medical Corps and illustrated by Diala Brisly. […]...have been incorporated into the narratives (Bartoloni 2015). Stories of actual children have been written down by Medical Corps staff members, and translated into visual form by Brisly, herself a refugee from Syria now living in Turkey. Health and hygiene-related educational messages and guidance (such as fire-safety and the dangers of land-mines) have been

incorporated into the narratives. Some comics are even specifically produced as a resource for circulating vital information in camps for refugees and asylum seekers. For example, the international women's rights organization MADRE has produced comics in Arabic and English, offering guidance about legal rights and processes in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan, respectively. But comics also address and support refugee readers in other ways. Displaced Syrian children are the intended readers of the comics anthology *Haawiyat*, of Syrian folk tales, produced by the US-based Comics for Youth Refugees Incorporated Collective (CYRIC) in a bid to sustain cultural identity (Salkowitz 2017; Sadar 2017).

Collaborative comics workshops with design students in Augsburg, Germany, resulted in the 2016 publication *Geschichten aus dem Grand Hotel* (*Stories from the Grand Hotel*). In a similar vein, the European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) project, 'Comics Creating Intercultural Stories', involved participants from Latvia, Poland, Germany, and Portugal in 2016. The programme offered training for youth workers and educators on how to use comics workshops to develop intercultural dialogue and support 'the integration process both for immigrants and locals' (http://ec.europa.eu). It is nevertheless worth bearing in mind that storytelling as (affirmative and discursive) emancipatory process depends on its incorporation of a (self-)critical approach (Ellsworth 1989; Razack 1993). Because as BRF's *Germany and Its People* shows, the imperative to integration motivating many of these comics does not necessarily imply a social and political acknowledgement of refugee subjectivities.

'Refugee Comics' as Counter-Discourse

Collaborations involving professional comics creators tend to be motivated by more substantial ambitions for publication and circulation. While clearly not excluding refugee readers, there is a sense that the aim of these works is to reach readers far removed from the subjects and related issues, locating them in the wider context of media discourse and representations in relation to this issue. Liisa Malkki has argued that standardized conceptions and discursive constructions of refugees (by national governments, NGOs, and relief agencies) emerged in the aftermath of World War 2, and that these have since become embedded within journalism (1996: 385–6). Malkki's argument is pertinent to critical discourse analysis of UK newspapers (Khosravinik 2010), which has shown that certain similarities can be discerned across the ideological spectrum. It would be an oversimplification

to claim that all journalism and media representation dealing with refugee questions is uniform or coherent. Some continuity is nevertheless suggested by the claim that 'coverage of these issues continues to represent asylum, and the asylum system in particular, as a problem' (Gross et al. 2007: 115), and that the mainstream media has played a crucial role in framing the sharp increase in arrivals on European shores since 2015 as a 'crisis' (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017: 4). Maria Georgiou and Rafal Zaborowski note that the individual stories of migrants and refugees, 'their lives and cultures [and] information about who these people actually are was absent or marginal in much of the press coverage in most European countries' (2017: 3).

Working collaboratively with refugees, advocacy projects endeavour to present an alternative to the often de-personalized and remote—if not always outright hostile—accounts of news media. Comics are useful for such purposes, in part because they are immediately and recognizably distinct from news media and its predominantly camera-derived images. The temptation to make claims for comics based on their formal attributes remains strong. But such a focus on these formal features potentially obscures how socio-historical practice—reading as pleasure; cartooning as social and political satire; the countercultural provocations by self-published comics during the 1960s and 1970s—also positions comics in relation to mainstream media coverage. The result is that comics are recognizably novel from—if not actively 'other' than—the dominant platforms for factual genres and news media.

Ambitions for credence nevertheless require a careful balancing act. While presenting as an alternative discourse, a range of directives indicate how readers are invited to approach and engage with the text. Paratextual indicators in the form of forewords and explanatory matter to account for process and methods all play a vital role. In many cases, claims to authenticity and accuracy are justified through invocations of codes and conventions that align with the genre expectations of journalism and documentary—though of course, not all comics creators recounting actual events feel beholden to the (usually) sober conventions of visual factual representation. Brisly's 'Our Life in a Tent' and Fransman's *Over Under Sideways Down* both make use of visual metaphor in ways that diverge from accepted protocols for comics making claims to documentary form. These metaphorical images convey dimensions of the refugee experience that are not necessarily 'visible' to the (often photographic) eye, particularly the refugee's interior and subjective experience. Such a manoeuvre

could be seen to break journalistic codes that ostensibly assert and assure audiences and readers of the representation's credibility and truth-value. Yet, it also brings into view the impossibility of directly communicating an experience through testimony (Peters 2009). Whether comprising words or images (or both), all strategies and representational schemes are partial and imperfect, but nevertheless vital for communicating the refugee experience. Where some (Glidden and Sacco) demonstrate a respectful and diligent approach to their assumed responsibilities of mediating with accuracy, attention to detail, and self-reflexive commentary, the visual metaphors deployed by others (Brisly and Fransman) utilize the capacity of drawing as a conceptual tool. The latter also draw on comics traditions in which clear boundaries between exterior realities and interior perceptions are more fluid than conventions of pictorial realism usually allow. That comics present as 'subjective', especially when contrasted with established platforms for factual and 'objective' discourse, becomes an advantage rather than a shortcoming.

Strategically positioned as *other* to the dominant tropes and photojournalistic images through which crises and catastrophes (including the refugee crisis) are mediated to distant readerships, comics have emerged as a valued resource for 'the cultural apparatus of human rights' (Nayar 2010). This cultural apparatus encompasses multiple forms and intersecting fields of production: 'Cultural representations in art galleries, museums or plays across the country have complimented haunting news images of traumatized people in wars or disasters', competing directly with 'hostile media scares over bogus asylum seekers scrounging welfare benefits' (Pupavac 2008: 270).

'Refugee Comics' as Advocacy Tools

The close-up and personal focus of comics, in both reportage modes and direct testimonies, ostensibly reinstates individuality and specificity. Tracing the development of autobiographical comics in North America, Jared Gardner has noted how 'the most personal stories became the ones that forged the most meaningful connections with others, opening up a dialogue with audiences and a sense of communal experience and release' (2007: 13). Self-telling modes and trauma narratives have undoubtedly been significant characteristics in the re-positioning of comics as cultural form (Chute 2010, 2016; Chaney 2011; El Refaie 2012). I will now attempt to understand 'refugee comics' in relation to such dynamics, while

also positioning them within critical discussions of traumatic storytelling as a means of advocacy.

Tensions between subjectivity as a core attribute, on the one hand, and ambitions to relate and represent actual events and experiences with careful regard to accuracy and credibility, on the other, apply in all autobiographical telling (Gilmore 2001: 129). These tensions are materially accentuated in autobiographical comics. They also figure in comics described by other genre assignations for which notions of truth and authenticity are similarly significant (Mickwitz 2016). A pluralistic and diverse cycle of contemporary comics, which combine factual and subjective registers, have engendered notable critical attention, interest from mainstream publishing houses, and widening readerships. The tension between subjectivity and factuality has thus proven highly productive, and presumably informs the confidence in comics as an effective platform for refugee advocacy. Even when collaboratively produced, most of the comics mentioned so far confer the kind of intimacy that Gardner describes (2007: 13). They narrate the stories of individuals and families in order to stimulate empathy and galvanize ethical responses. Anthropologist Meg McLagan has described this as constructing 'witnessing publics' through testimony, to extend 'a subject position that implies responsibility for the suffering of others' (2003: 609).

A notable exception to this model is Tings Chak's *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention Centres* (2017), which includes accounts of detained individuals, but in which the images present schematic architectural plans and views (both interior and exterior) mostly devoid of human beings.[3] More commonly, however, the focus on individual experience follows the lineage of comics as vehicles for autobiographical trauma narratives. To develop a critical understanding of these comics, and the contexts in which they circulate for consumption, it is necessary to turn to literature on refugee narratives and human-interest conventions.

The very telling of these stories in the first place—the recounting of their experiences by refugees in different contexts and situations—occurs 'in relation to socially available and hegemonic discourses and practices' (Anthias 2002: 511, cited in Sigona 2014: 370). These stories, 'solicited by truth commissions, journalists, academics and therapists, now circulate

[3] Originally published as a series of zines, this project has since been taken up by Ad Astra Comix, a Canadian publishing collective dedicated to producing social justice comics, and re-printed through crowd-funding.

the world through particular relations of production, exchange and consumption' (Colvin 2006: 172), but rarely remain within the control of those who originally tell them. Victim narratives are key to eligibility (Cabot 2013). In *Over Under Sideways Down*, Fransman pictures this process with a silhouette depiction of Ebrahim, sat facing an interviewer across a table (2015: 18). The motif is repeated three times down the page. Above each is a horizontal speech balloon through which we can see the gradual translation of his experiences into bureaucratic data. Victimhood is central to asylum seeker's claims to the eligibility and entitlements of refugee status, and demands enactment through scripts and codes (Malkki 1996; Pupavac 2008), as well as conforming to the criteria provided by institutional agencies (Zetter 2007). While reinstating the subjective experience of Ebrahim's narrative, as an advocacy tool the comic still follows the logic of performing 'the signs of injury' (Ross 2003: 12, cited by Colvin 2004: 72) (Fig. 16.1).

Sympathetic counter-representations of refugees, whether circulated by agencies or independently, contribute to the construction of the refugee cause. Yet, 'sympathetic identification with refugees over the past two decades' has taken place 'against a backdrop of worsening refugee rights' (Pupavac 2008: 277). Vanessa Pupavac describes how the figure of the traumatized refugee victim has come to replace the trope of the heroic political dissident, in circulation during the Cold War. She argues that, as part of a wider cultural turn towards 'self-identities based on diagnosis or wounded attachments to a traumatic past' (2008: 275), this paradigm shift has involved a re-casting of political solidarity as permissive empathy, with significant consequences. '[P]ermissive empathy develops professional management of refugees' welfare, rather than necessarily greater refugee rights' (Pupavac 2008: 281). This echoes concerns that victim narratives and images of suffering ultimately do more to reassure the relatively privileged and powerful about their capacity to care than to affect meaningful change (Rosler 2004: 151–206).

Nevertheless, it is evident that many comics creators are far from naïve to the tropes of representation, and through them, the subject positions extended to readers. For example, the PositiveNegatives comics demonstrate clear attempts to address some of the criticisms levelled at not just news media, but also humanitarian aid campaigns. The consistent layout adds to their deliberate and measured quality, and the absence of visual hyperbole pre-empts charges of sensationalism. There are no acute angles or noticeable foreshortenings, no visually emoting images. Drawn with

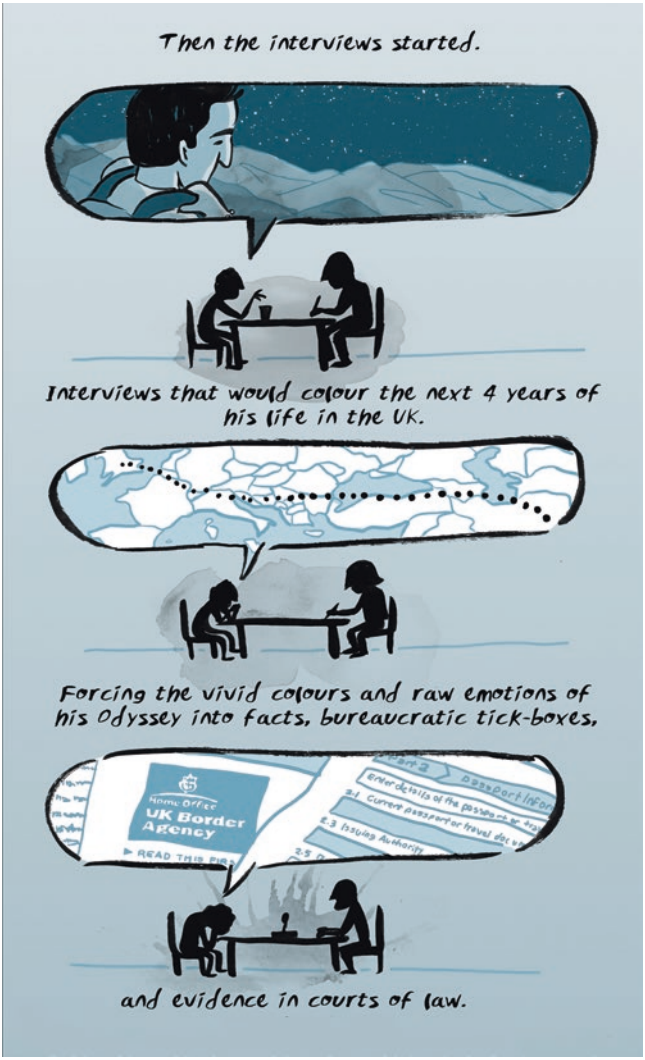

Fig. 16.1 A page from Karrie Fransman's *Over Under Sideways Down*, in which a silhouetted Ebrahim talks with an interviewer across a table in a repeated motif. (Reproduced with the permission of the artist)

gentle characterization and softly rounded lines, the slightly compressed characters instead recall a certain style of children's illustration. But they are, significantly, not only adult 'protagonists', but also in several cases adult males. Inviting empathy through their friendly and unthreatening appearance, these drawn figures, combined with retrospective narration, facilitate a refusal of 'two regulative narratives'—'"youth and gender" and "crisis and urgency"' (Käpylä and Kennedy 2014: 258)—that often structure humanitarian awareness campaigns. Humanitarian advocates' 'preferences for artistic, professional or depoliticized female refugees' (Pupavac 2008: 290) are not completely undone, however. In *A Perilous Journey*, readers are invited to recognize the protagonist of Hasko's story, also published in a liberal broadsheet *The Guardian* (12/11/2015), as an artist and middle-class Syrian with values no different from their own. To some extent, this still supports the thesis that stories are selected to present refugees as particularly vulnerable or deserving, and that human interest and victim tropes of humanitarian representations tend to remove specific and political context.

The thirty-five-page comic *Así es la vida* (This Is Life), published by the non-government charitable organization Accem, was written and drawn by Tresor Londja, a Congolese refugee now living in Spain. Among the many different comics centring on a refugee narrator, *Así es la vida* is notably exceptional in its careful tracing of the protagonist's journey from political activist to refugee. Its detailed account of specific political circumstances seems significantly linked to Londja's agency as the author constructing the account.

Uneven relations constituting advocacy projects 'index both the limits and possibilities of representation' (Cabot 2016), and this is evidenced in the commonplace juxtaposition of refugee subjects known by first names, with fully named creators. Anonymity can, of course, be a protective measure. Yet here it underlines that despite the specificity of individual stories, they also function as exemplifications, and that first-person narration does not directly correspond to authorial or editorial control. Hence questions of authorship seem to call for further attention.

Authors and Platforms

Whether fiction or factual, published by large or small independent comics publishers, mainstream book publishers or self-published, in print or online, authorship is important in contemporary comics cultures. As with

other cultural forms and industries, sales figures are not the only measure of success: festivals, conventions, critics, and awards all operate as gatekeeping structures and formations of prestige. It would be disingenuous to claim that authorial kudos plays no part in the case of refugee comics. In the examples discussed in this chapter, the names and biographical information of professional creators and artists involved tend to be presented as an important feature of paratextual materials.

The reportage mode of exposition, in which author-artists figure as a crucial device, foregrounds the author function and persona even more intently. Placing a creator as a central conduit through which a reader is offered a specific perspective simultaneously draws on and reproduces authorial cachet. Here, subjective frames and individual experience remain at the forefront, as in the winning combination of memoir and long-form narrative that for some time has preoccupied comics scholarship. This functions to strengthen the author's profile and positioning as a cultural producer: as Matthew Pustz argues, autobiographical comics have been vital in positioning authorial claims to recognition (2007).

The cultural capital associated with established comics creators can, in turn, be harnessed to enhance the circulation of texts. When Joe Sacco's *The Unwanted* (2010) was published by *The Guardian*, Sacco had already been critically lauded, won an impressive number of prestigious awards for his work, and been interviewed in the mainstream press on several occasions. Josh Neufeld contributed the webcomic element of the collaborative multimedia feature *The Road to Germany: $2400*, published on the Foreign Policy website in 2016. Known by comics aficionados as one of Harvey Pekar's artist collaborators, he also gained wider recognition for his webcomic and subsequent print book, *AD New Orleans: After the Deluge* (2005–2008; 2009), that documented the lives of people caught up in the destruction and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Accolades and an established profile can be useful for publicizing purposes, potentially helping to reach wider readerships and extend the reach of the stories documented by the comics.

On the other hand, and whether they adopt conventions of factual genres, signal their intentions by way of paratextual markers, or both, 'refugee comics' belong to a category of comics that engage with topical issues, and do so through their adoption of the 'serious' address of factual discourse. In so doing, they also make certain demands on behalf of comics as a cultural field. As comics deal with serious topical issues in a register marked by documentary form and political subjects, they also demand

that comics be taken seriously. There are also gains for creators, by widening the contexts of circulation, potential readership scope, and critical attention. Kate Evans' *Threads* (2017) is published by Verso, 'the largest independent, radical publishing house in the English-speaking world' (www.versobooks.com). The sanctioning of a comics author by a publisher such as Verso is likely to offer cross-over value; meanwhile, the highly selective process and rarity of comics published by distributors such as Verso also confer particular esteem on the author/creator.[4]

As Evans' comics, originally made available to online publics on her website, are collated and consolidated into book form, they take on the qualities of a material object. It would require a more extended research project to gauge exactly how the migration from online presence to book form might impact on reader demographics, or indeed alter readers' engagement and affective responses. In spite of digital dominance across media and everyday practices, the seductive material qualities of the book appear to have lost none of their potency. But pleasures invested in a desirable object (a beautifully designed book with artwork in high-quality reproduction) might seem incongruent with stories of hardship and suffering. Such an object embodies a certain tension between the aims to engender compassion, to contribute to debate, and ultimately to mobilize political action and social change, and the commodification of victim narratives.

While books retain their distinguishing weight (physical and symbolic), collaborative short form comics projects and online publishing count for a significant portion of comics telling refugees' stories. Even if constraints such as language barriers and uneven access still play a part, digital distribution bypasses the logistical processes of their material counterparts. Comics published online tend towards the immediacies of both short form and self-publishing, and internet platforms moreover allow continuities in relation to seriality and creator/reader dialogue. While their materiality is one of devices and screens, digital comics' distribution and publishing offer possibilities that in some ways correlate to earlier comics—those distinctly material entities printed on cheap paper, at times shared among readers (Gibson 2008) and often boasting lively letters pages (Stein 2013). Such immediacy offers added value in terms of expanding discursive spaces.

[4]While boasting that they release a hundred titles a year, Verso's graphic overall novel output currently stands at nine titles, including *Red Rosa* (2015), Evans' biography of Rosa Luxemburg.

Conclusion

'Refugee comics' comprise a highly varied corpus, not merely in terms of their textual approaches. This chapter has attempted to offer a constructively critical view that also considers the significance of publishing formats and contexts, funding, and commissioning. It has highlighted that, in order to produce a satisfactory analysis of specific examples, considering the various actors and relationships involved in production and circulation is crucial. In the end, 'refugee comics' need to be understood as an assemblage or network, involving multiple drivers and plural purposes.

> Traumatic memories are always in circulation, being revalued in each transaction according to the logic of supply and demand. Victim and witness; witness and reporter; reporter and audience; producer and consumer: all these parties bargain to suit their different interests. (Tomsky 2011: 58)

Acknowledging the transactional aspects and complex mechanisms involved does not undermine the importance of the work they do by constructing alternative or expanded discursive spaces. But following Pupavac (2008: 272), it is as vital to pay critical attention to positive representations as it is to those that vilify refugees and inveigle a climate of fear. In spite of honourable intentions, 'in abstracting their predicaments from specific political, historical, cultural contexts—humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees' (Malkki 1996: 378). As comics working in an advocating capacity establish their presence on a variety of platforms, they must continue to pay heed to this caution.

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