

# COMICS AND MIGRATION

## Representation and Other Practices

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### The entanglements of comics and migration

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### The entanglements of comics and migration

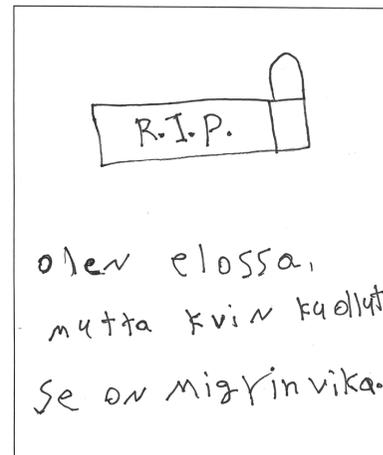
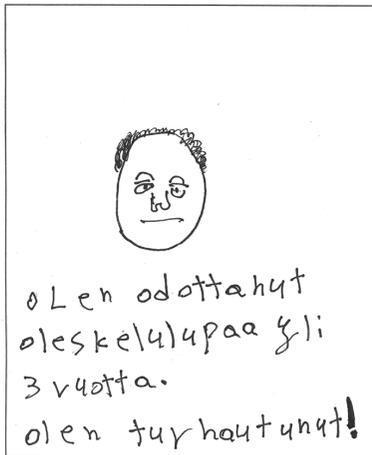
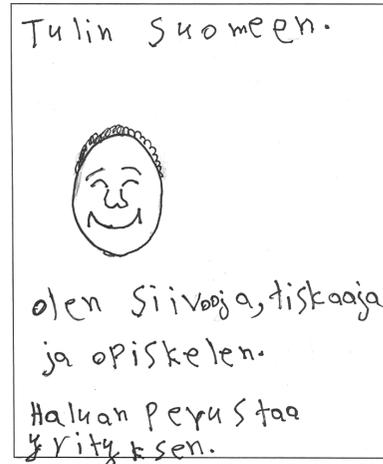
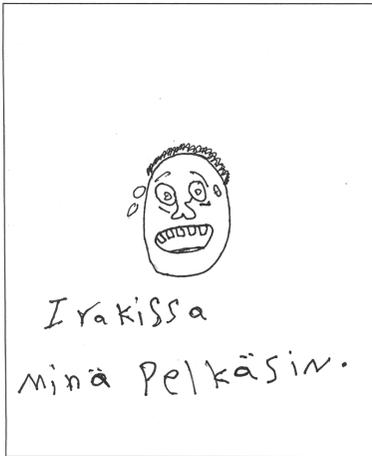
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In 2016, the Finnish non-governmental organisation World Comics Finland arranged comics workshops for adult asylum seekers at reception centres. This developed into the project “Illustrating Me”, which since has continued to organise workshops for migrant groups in Finland, often in cooperation with other NGOs active in the field of migration. One of the comics produced in such a workshop is “Miksi?” (Why?) by Mohammed, Yasseen, and Salam (Figure 1.1). In all its visual and linguistic simplicity, the comic and its context of creation highlight how comics and migration are articulated and what the premise of this volume is.

On the level of representation, “Miksi?” is a four-panel story of an individual who has fled from Iraq to Finland. He works, studies, and dreams of a future as an entrepreneur in his new country, yet he is awaiting a decision concerning his application for asylum or a residence permit. The first three panels depicting the face of the I-narrator talk about flight and settlement. In the final panel, the heavy burden of the difficult wait and insecurity is conveyed with a strong simile, where the image of a tombstone with the text R.I.P. is accompanied by the narrator’s statement, “I am alive, but like dead”. Finally, in the last sentence, the comic strongly asserts that the Finnish Immigration Service is to blame for the I-narrator’s current predicament. The general, existentialist question comprising the title of the comic, at least in part, is also more concretely directed at this authority.

The “Illustrating Me” project aims to give refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants the opportunity to tell their own stories and state their opinions through comics. This kind of “grassroots comics” was first generated and cultivated in development aid work, after which they have been used in different social settings and in many countries. The central idea is that anybody can do comics and express themselves through them, regardless of previous experience of the medium (Packalén and Sharma 2007). To many of the participants of the “Illustrating Me” workshops, the experience of creating comics was completely new.

# MIKSI ?



Mohammed  
" " "

Yaseen  
" " "

Salam  
" " "

**FIGURE 1.1** Mohammed, Yaseen, and Salam, "Miksi?" (Why?), World Comics Finland, 2018. Translation of the text (from *Kuti* no. 59, n.p.): "In Iraq I was afraid. // I came to Finland. I work as a cleaner, dishwasher and I study. I want to start a business. // I have been waiting three years for asylum. I am frustrated. // R.I.P. / I am alive but like dead. It's Migri's [Finnish Immigration Service] fault".

Source: Reproduced with the permission of World Comics Finland and the artists.

A workshop of a day or a few hours begins with the participants being taught the basics of grassroots comics: a bound format of four panels in two tiers. A4 paper is used for sketching in pencil and A3 for the final ink or marker pen comic. The participants are taught about sequential narration and the art of drawing stick figures and facial expressions. The latter has been put to good use in the first three panels of “Miksi?”, which depict fear, joyous relief, and the weariness of the wait, respectively, creating a conventional refugee narrative through simple means. Although heavily dependent on prefabricated templates of format and visual language, the comic successfully tells an emotionally expressive and politically pregnant story. While the process of creation itself is central to the grassroots comics practice, the comics of “Illustrating Me” have been distributed through both exhibitions and an online gallery.

The comic “Miksi?” and the “Illustrating Me” project point at a key dimension of the current volume: comics are not just about representations, isolated texts, intertextual relations, or singular manifestations of a medium’s affordances. Comics involve concrete and complex processes of production, distribution, and consumption. For comics to exist, to be created and read, and to have an effect, a whole world of ideational, material, and human resources needs to be mobilised. *Comics and Migration: Representation and Other Practices* foregrounds the breadth of different practices, that is, what is done with and what comics do with regard to another variegated phenomenon: migration. While a crucial aspect of comics in relation to migration is that the former represents the latter, this is not the only way in which the two intertwine. As the subtitle of this volume suggests, there are a myriad of other practices and functions alongside the practice of representation that connect comics and migration. Like the “Illustrating Me” project exemplifies, comics are an object and a vehicle of education, a means of expression, advocacy, social and political action, or a pastime for three men over a cup of tea.

Comics studies foregrounds a close reading of the comic as text: what it shows, tells, and represents. As important as this is, the current volume aims to broaden the scope and to provide a reminder that comics are not only texts to be approached through analyses of their form and content but also objects that are made and used for different purposes. Close reading (in general terms) is not abandoned in this volume, but the overall aim is to see comics in relation to a wide range of practices besides representation and to approach comics by considering their cultural, social, and political contexts.

This introduction maps the current state of research on the entanglements of comics and migration. An ambitious undertaking, this has resulted in an extensive chapter which will assist the reader who is not familiar with this broad field of research. The discussion is guided by an understanding of the relations between, on the one hand, research on comics and migration and, on the other hand, larger trends in comics studies. It is structured according to the distinction made earlier: first, we discuss research strands that focus on comics as representation, after which we turn our attention to other uses of comics, which are much less researched. Our discussion focuses on the following perspectives: cartooning and stereotypes, graphic life writing and identity, memory and trauma, witnessing and human

rights, readerly engagements and empathy, advocacy and NGO-produced comics, comics workshops and self-expression, and comics in education. We present the chapters of the volume interspersed with the theoretically oriented research mapping to highlight how the present volume and the various perspectives herein take part in the existing discussions and extend our understanding of the relationships between comics and migration.

Before we continue, let us make some clarifications concerning the vocabulary related to human mobility. We use the term “migration” as a general rubric for the broad and variegated phenomenon of people moving from one place to another for various reasons. Similarly, when referring to people on the move, “migrant” is used as an umbrella term. In individual chapters, however, more specific terminology – such as “forced migration”, “immigration”, “labour migration”, “refugee”, “immigrant”, “asylum seeker”, and “guest worker” – is applied to describe people’s movement in different historical, social, and political circumstances.

While distinct concepts like these may be useful when describing the motivations for people’s mobility, such as work opportunities, or for distinguishing between voluntary and forced movements, they also conceal or simplify the realities of migration that are often more complex than such concepts can disclose. This concerns the habit of differentiating between voluntary and involuntary migration. While this distinction is promoted, for example, by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and reflected in global and local migration policies, research has shown that “a clear-cut distinction between forced and non-forced migration does not account for the way migratory processes actually work and take place in the real world”, since people’s movements are often motivated by both compulsion and choice and grounded in several intersecting factors (Scalettaris 2007, 39; see also Atak and Crépeau 2021).

As the distinction between voluntary and forced migration, or between migrants and refugees, makes evident, many migration-related concepts are intimately connected to legal instruments and policies. While terms such as “refugee” or “asylum seeker”, which derive from the legal sphere, are often used in research and quotidian language when referring to specific groups of people, migration scholars have reminded us that these labels cannot be regarded as relevant identity or group categories in a sociological or anthropological sense (see, e.g. Malkki 1995; Scalettaris 2007). The analytical usefulness of a legal or bureaucratic label is limited, as it “does not say as much about the people to whom it refers as about the system that produced the label” (Scalettaris 2007, 41). Again, the distinction between voluntary migrants and refugees is a case in point. While the premise of the international refugee regime, which is largely based on the UN Refugee Convention, is humanitarian, the need to distinguish between refugee and non-refugee migrants seems to reflect the interests of managing and restricting migratory flows to the Global North more than the interests of those who leave their homes in the Global South to search for safety and livelihood elsewhere (Scalettaris 2007, 44–45; Atak and Crépeau 2021).

With these limitations and dependencies in mind, this volume approaches migration-related terms critically, understanding them as discursive formations that are historical and may take different meanings in different usages and contexts, ranging from legal definitions to everyday parlance and political propaganda. Rather than sticking with some definitive concepts, many chapters use multiple terms (such as “migrant” and “refugee”) interchangeably, thus working against dichotomous thinking, challenging the tendency to pit refugee rights against migrant rights, and promoting a broader approach to complex migratory phenomena.

## Migration in comics

Why then “comics and migration”? What is the relationship between the two? What do comics do vis-à-vis migration? It is clear that there has been an upsurge of comics narrating and commenting upon migration in the last few years (e.g. Naghibi et al. 2020, 295; Nijdam 2021). At the same time, as the trend has been acknowledged in research, scholars have paid attention to the longer history of connections between comics and human mobility (Gardner 2010; Marie and Ollivier 2013; Platthaus 2020; Serrano 2021b). The migratory background of comics artists, characters, and readers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States, where the mass cultural form of newspaper comics developed, has been recognised, as has Superman’s refugee background. The forebears of the current boom, such as Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama’s *The Four Immigrants Manga* (1999 [1931]), giving insight into Japanese immigrants’ lives in the United States in the 1920s, or Moebius’ antiracist take on far-right, racist violence, “Cauchemar blanc” (1974), have gained renewed attention (see, e.g. Nabizadeh 2019, 28–42; McKinney 2020, 17, 25–28), as has the fact that a number of the most revered, canonised works in comics in the late 20th and early 21st centuries are concerned with flight, forced displacement, and migration. One only needs to think of lists of the most important “documentary comics” (on the concept, see Mickwitz 2016), which seldom fail to mention Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980–1991), Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (1993–1995), or Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000–2003).

The formation of the comics canon and its gravitation towards the documentary mode explain, at least to some extent, the interest in stories about migration in comics in the 21st century (see, e.g. Naghibi and O’Malley 2020, 307). The aforementioned works have paved the way for artists (and publishers) interested in their own lives and family histories, as well as the historical and current political and social contexts of people’s destinies in – and experiences of – conflict and displacement. At the same time, this tendency is reflective of what happens in the world: people move, and sedentary populations everywhere encounter migrants. The number of refugees in the world keeps growing – the UNHCR (2021) estimates that over 82 million people (1 percent of the world’s population) were forcibly displaced in 2020. Concurrently, border control and restrictions on transnational movements are being bolstered and debated in many parts of the world.

Comics artists, like other people, have migrated and continue to do so. This has left traces in different comics traditions across genres. A few examples may suffice (and at the same time suggest the kinds of movement that can be regarded as migration): Rudolph Dirks moved as a child with his family from Germany to the United States in 1884 and went on to produce the popular and long-lived strip “The Katzenjammer Kids”, a humorous view of an immigrant family whose status is underlined by the main characters’ German-English accents. Frans Masereel left Belgium for Switzerland to avoid military service in the First World War and started to produce political and socially conscious woodcut images and graphic novels in exile. Vannak Anan Prum, who left Cambodia to work in neighbouring Thailand and ended up in captivity on a fishing boat, pays witness to his travails and endurance in *The Dead Eye and the Deep Blue Sea: A Graphic Memoir of Modern Slavery* (2018). Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, adopted as a baby from South Korea to Sweden, depicts in *Palimpsest* (2016) the search for the protagonist’s roots in the muddled bureaucracies of international adoption.

Of course, as *Maus* famously attests, comics artists have taken it upon themselves to depict their own family histories of migration, flight, and displacement. Examples from around the world include GB Tran’s *Vietnamerica: A Family’s Journey* (2010) and Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir* (2017), both of which share the migration histories of Vietnamese families settling in the United States; Halfdan Pisket’s trilogy *Desertor* (2014), *Kakerlak* (2015), and *Dansker* (2016) focus on his father’s journey from Turkey to Denmark; Nina Bunjevac’s *Fatherland: A Family History* (2015) discusses the artist’s father’s life in Yugoslavia and Canada; and Emilie Saitas’ two volumes of *L’Arbre de mon père* (2018, 2020) trace her own transnational family history and that of her Egypt-born Greek father.

The profusion of personal and family memoirs employed for narratives about migration in comics is accompanied by a growth in journalistic comics representing different aspects of migration. These comics are usually based on interviews with refugees and other displaced people and on the comics artists’ own observations of locations, events, and institutional settings that migrants journey through, are settled in, or in which they are kept against their will. With the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 and the increase of asylum seekers in the European Union in 2015, artists have increasingly produced comics reports from refugee camps, detention centres, and the perilous travel routes used by migrants. For an earlier example, in “Chechen War, Chechen Women” (2008), Sacco visits several settlements of Chechen refugees in Ingushetia. Many successors have traced the routes and destinies of migrants in Europe. In addition to comic books and albums, new online platforms as well as the digital sites of traditional media have provided channels for comics journalism on migration. The *Drawing the Times* website for comics journalism, established in the Netherlands in 2015, collects several reports from different sites, such as Aleksandar Zograf’s “Migrants’ Stories” (2016) or Ahmed Mohammed Omer and Alice Social’s “Across the Sahara and Onto the Metro” (2017), originally published as part of the German Comics Association’s “Alphabet des Ankommens” (“Alphabet of Arrival”) project.

Yet another form of depiction of the lives and circumstances of migrating people can be found in comics artists' renderings based on longer stays as workers or volunteers at encampments and institutions. The most well-known and studied is probably Kate Evans' *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (2017), which draws on the artist's experiences as a volunteer in the "Calais Jungle". Based on her work as a comics teacher for refugees, Ali Fitzgerald draws her own experiences together with those of the refugees and the history of Berlin in *Drawn to Berlin: Comic Workshops in Refugee Shelters and Other Stories from a New Europe* (2018). Finnish artist Lauri Ahtinen, who has had years of experience working as a teacher in preparatory education for immigrant children, depicts the emotional lives of Hazara boys, awaiting the Immigration Service's decisions on their asylum applications after arriving alone in Finland, in a significantly fictionalised form in the comics album *Elias* (2018).

While the "factual approach" dominates in comics on migration (see Mickwitz 2020a, 280), there are also exceptions, such as Will Eisner's multiple comics about immigrants in 20th-century America, beginning with *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978). Unquestionably a part of the international comics canon, Shaun Tan's wordless *The Arrival* (2007 [2006]) includes fantastical elements that distance the story of a migrating family father from historical migration while also visually alluding to immigration in the United States at the turn of the 20th century. It is by no means a watertight distinction, but it seems that when young readers are addressed with comics on migration, fiction is the preferred mode. Morten Dürr and Lars Horneman's *Zenobia* (2016) and Eoin Colfer, Andrew Donkin, and Giovanni Rigano's *Illegal: A Graphic Novel Telling One Boy's Epic Journey to Europe* (2017) present journeys of fictional child protagonists from the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean and Europe. While *Zenobia* lacks any paratexts explaining the story's relation to real events, *Illegal* includes several explanatory texts, beginning with an epigraph quoting Elie Wiesel; the afterword states, "The story you've just read about Ebo's journey is a work of fiction, but every separate element of it is true" (Colfer et al. 2017, 125). When representing a theme like migration, comics – both documentary and fictional – predominantly turn to mimetic, realistic, and historical approaches. The symbolic, fairy-tale treatment of border control and the relations between minority and majority populations in Wayde Compton and April dela Noche Milne's *The Blue Road: A Fable of Migration* (2019) is exceptional in a field devoted to addressing the reader in an informative manner.

## Research on comics and migration

Many of the comics mentioned earlier could be described as "refugee comics", a term often used to refer to comics depicting displacement, and maybe a sign of the formation of a new genre (first used in Rifkind 2017). The use of the term "refugee comics" has been open-ended, mainly referring to the common topics of migration, flight, and displacement in comics rather than to specific generic conventions

within them (e.g. Rifkind 2017; Mickwitz 2020b). While Dominic Davies (2020b, 385) places the term on the same level as “migrant comics”, “detention comics”, and the broader categories of “documentary comics” and “crisis comics”, Nina Mickwitz (2020a, 283) concludes, “They are all . . . 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”. In line with Davies’ suggestion, the aforementioned comics can also be labelled as “crisis comics”, as defined by Sidonie Smith (2011; see also Rifkind 2017, 649) in her article on human rights-oriented comics that address catastrophe, conflicts, disaster, and human rights violations, and offer testimony, education, and commentary on these issues.

The growing body and rich variety of comics on migration is increasingly acknowledged in scholarly discussions in different disciplinary frameworks and from different theoretical perspectives. While there exists a longer tradition of scholarship on the entanglements of comics and migration (evidenced, for example, by the sheer number of studies on Satrapi’s *Persepolis*), the recent boom of migration-themed comics has resulted in several volumes or journal special issues focusing on the matter. These include *Immigrants and Comics: Graphic Spaces of Remembrance, Transaction, and Mimesis*, edited by Nhora Lucia Serrano (2021a), a collection of articles that focuses on comics’ representations of immigrant subjects and experiences in many different genres and works, starting with R. F. Outcault’s Yellow Kid, and ponders the ways in which immigration, both as a topic and as part of artists’ identities, has shaped the comics form and canon (Serrano 2021b, 10–11). With a focus on recent comic art, “Migration, Exile, and Diaspora in Graphic Life Narratives” (2020), edited by Nima Naghibi, Candida Rifkind, and Eleanor Ty for *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, centres on depictions of migration and migrants in the genre of graphic life writing, and “Migration in Twenty-First-Century Documentary Comics” (2021), edited by Benjamin Bigelow and Rüdiger Singer for *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society*, explores comics about migration through the perspective of the documentary genre.

Beyond the anglophone sphere of research, the German-language anthology *Krieg und Migration im Comic: Interdisziplinäre Analysen* (icon Düsseldorf 2020) analyses representations of war and migration in European, North American, and Japanese comics. *Tausend Bilder und eins – Comic als ästhetische Praxis in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft* (Weber and Moritzen 2017) is a versatile collection of comics by students, essays, and scholarly analyses that approach the themes of comics, migration, and intercultural social processes. We assume that the wide interest in the entanglements of comics and migration will soon be reflected in monographs as well, yet at the moment of writing there is only one, Mark McKinney’s *Postcolonialism and Migration in French Comics* (2020). Through case studies of artists and themes, such as on Farid Boudjellal or *sans-papiers*, McKinney designates migration as a continuous theme in French comics since the 1960s. Contrary to most studies on comics and migration, McKinney also discusses far-right xenophobia in comics. Of course, classifications of what is about migration and what is not are always

arbitrary. For example, monographs with a minority focus may show a significant interest in migration, as seen in Héctor D. Fernandez L'Hoeste's *Lalo Alcaraz: Political Cartooning in the Latino Community* (2017).

Although these publications cover a wide range of topics and perspectives, some common interests emerge, as seen in previous research on migration-themed comics. Comics have brought into focus migration from many perspectives, being centred on the different phases of migration, that is, departure and the reasons for it, the stages of travel consisting of both movement and standstill, as well as settlement, temporarily or more permanently, in new milieux. They have highlighted migration in multiple geographical locations, as well as the experiences and emotions of migrant subjects, the circumstances enabling and hindering migration (e.g. border control and practices of incarceration), and both welcoming and xenophobic reactions of the surrounding societies, as well as the formation of identities of immigrants and their offspring. Crucially, the representations of migration in comics have often been regarded as providing readers with different perspectives and education vis-à-vis the dominant modes of representation in media in general (Mickwitz 2020a, 285). Comics have been seen as purveyors of alternatives to anonymising, dehumanising, sensationalist, and scaremongering media representations. Political cartooning and its use of stereotypes provide an ambivalent example of representations on the threshold of the sensationalist and the more nuanced depictions. While graphic life writing has been associated with analyses of identities and identity formation vis-à-vis migration, comics reportage has been interpreted in terms of humanitarian witnessing. Both forms of representation have been discussed with reference to the mediation of traumatic experiences related to migration and the potential of comics to engage with readers' emotions, leading them to cultivate empathy and solidarity. In the following sections, we examine some of these discussions more closely.

## Cartoons and stereotypes

While the dominant mode of comics on migration nowadays seems to be the documentary, the history of the relationship between comics and migration has an early beginning in the sister medium of political cartoons, a medium with a historical connection to the field of journalism, albeit less clearly dedicated to verisimilitude. The humorous or satirical treatment of migration in visual-verbal short, punchy statements has a long history visible on both sides of the Atlantic during the European emigration to America (and elsewhere) in the 19th and early 20th centuries (for a discussion of one example, Joseph Keppler's *Puck* magazine cartoon "Looking Backward" from 1893, see Serrano 2021b, 4–5). As Matthew Robson (2019, 115–116) states, "the format has been readily exploited both by those who affirm hegemonic political positions, and others who orient themselves towards contestation or subversion".

Studies of migration-themed cartoon art in several transnational settings affirm this. In an analysis of cartoons on *harraga* (or *harga*, irregular migration from the

country) by two Algerian cartoonists, Hic (Hichem Baba Ahmed) and (Ali) Dilem, Farida Souiah (2016) observes that they not only make the phenomenon visible but also provide explanations for it and criticise the authorities and the unjust migration policies of Algeria and the EU. In a different vein, the cartoons of the artist Stanley McMurtry (who goes by the pen name Mac) in the British conservative newspaper *Daily Mail*, studied by Robson (2019), represent immigrants in an extremely negative way and depict British attitudes towards and control over immigration as too lax. In a third example from yet another milieu, Julie Alev Dilmaç and Özker Kocadal (2018) show how stereotypical depictions of Syrian refugees as anonymous, helpless masses in Turkey are used to satirise the country's politics and politicians, who allegedly only use the refugees for their own gain.

Both the British and Turkish cases highlight the relevance of stereotypes for political cartoons in general and with regard to the depiction of migrants in particular. According to comics artist Will Eisner (2008 [1985]), comics rely heavily on stereotyping and types, that is, simplified characters that readily convey information in the service of the narrative. The detrimental aspect of this has been noted by Derek Parker Royal, who writes about the representations of race and ethnicity in an American context:

In comics and graphic art there is always the all-too-real danger of negative stereotype and caricature, which strips others of any unique identity and dehumanises by means of reductive iconography – the big noses, the bug eyes, the buck teeth, and the generally deformed features that have historically composed our visual discourse of the Other.

*(Royal 2007, 8)*

However, writing about racial stereotypes, Jared Gardner (2010, 135) notes, “Single-panel comics especially lend themselves to the work of stereotyping”. While sequential images and comics augment ambiguity, thanks to the interpretative effort demanded by elliptical narration, an image confined to one panel is better equipped for stereotypical representation (Gardner 2010, 136–138). While Gardner intriguingly suggests that the great immigration to the United States coincides with the emergence of sequential comics in the country and thus “the more nuanced and complex portrayal of racial and ethnic ‘Others’ in mainstream American comics” (Gardner 2010, 135), it is obvious that stereotypes continue to play a crucial role in the depiction of migrant (and other) minorities, in both single- and multi-panel comics, in the United States and elsewhere.

In the cases studied in this volume, ethnic and racial stereotyping is most conspicuously present in the two action genre comics analysed by Anna Marta Marini in “On the ‘good’ side: Hegemonic masculinity and transnational intervention in the representation of US–Mexico border enforcement”. Here the focus is on Peter Milligan’s *Army of Two: Across the Border* (2010) and Doug Wagner’s *ICE* (2011–2012), both dealing with immigration and border control at the US–Mexico border. As Marini’s analysis shows, both comics valorise border enforcement

and US interventionism and, as a part of this, reproduce negative stereotypes of migrants while depicting Mexican authorities as inept. Marini not only points out the connections of the comics with nationalist, nativist political discourse in the United States but also remarks that the comics “were not produced to explicitly embody a political statement”. In contrast, this is the exact point found in Oskari Rantala’s chapter “V for pissed-offedness: Anti-immigrant subversion of dystopian superhero intertexts”. He analyses the intermedial and intertextual connections of a film advertisement produced by the conservative, nationalist, and populist Finns Party before the parliamentary elections in Finland in 2019. The film makes use of both Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s comic *V for Vendetta* and its film adaptation to represent a local dystopia of corrupt, EU-friendly politicians and immigration gone out of control. Rantala’s analysis highlights how negative, racist stereotypes of immigrants are integrated with the subversive use of *V for Vendetta*, thus being representative of the provocative political culture of contemporary right-wing populism.

## Graphic life writing and identity

The political communication of cartoons provides one inroad to analyses of comics and migration. A much more common or broad-ranging framework for reading comics on migration is provided by graphic life writing, encompassing autobiographies, biographies, and family histories. As evidenced by the special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* (Naghbi et al. 2020), this also reflects a general trend in comics studies. The boom of graphic life writing comprises, among others, the famous works of Spiegelman and Satrapi, while the excitement around concepts explaining the entanglements of comics and self-representation, such as “auto-graphics” (Whitlock 2006), has engendered a large body of scholarship focusing on (auto)biographical comics, an area that undoubtedly constitutes an important sub-field of contemporary comics studies (among many, see, e.g. Chute 2010; Chaney 2011; El Refaie 2012; Ernst 2017; Köhlert 2019; Mejjammar 2020).

Migration was not necessarily a central concept in such studies before the late 2010s. Instead, the discursive context is offered by the issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and transnationalism, and the representation of ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities in comics across different genres (see, for instance, *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle*, edited by Frederick Luis Aldama (2010); *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads*, edited by Shane Denson et al. (2013); *Postcolonial Comics: Texts, Events, Identities*, edited by Binita Mehta and Pia Mukherji (2015); and *Drawing New Color Lines: Transnational Asian American Graphic Narratives*, edited by Monica Chiu (2015)). In these contexts, comics that from a later perspective appear as migration narratives are seen as stories of self-formation, where identities are negotiated in transnational and postcolonial, multicultural, and multiracial settings.

An example of the analytical focus on identity and self-formation is provided by the discussions on *Persepolis* that have characterised the memoir as, among other

things, feminist writing, witnessing, and a representation of Iranian-diasporic identity (Naghbi and O'Malley 2020). A common thread in these discussions, which often associate Satrapi's autobiographical comic with the genre of *Bildungsroman*, the fictional counterpart of the modern (auto)biography, is the focus on the dynamic relationship between the individual and the community or society, in which the identity of the protagonist is formed (see, e.g. Whitlock 2006; Earle 2021). While the negotiations between the individual and the society have always been at the centre of both *Bildungsroman* and modern (auto)biography, analyses of *Persepolis* and other works of graphic life writing thematising migratory experiences point towards the relevance of addressing and reflecting societal assumptions and expectations from a migratory standpoint. Indeed, as Rifkind (2021, 206) notes with reference to Lila Quintero Weaver's *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black and White* (2012), in migrant and/or minority subjects' narratives of becoming, the question that often seems to motivate the search for identity is not "Who am I?" but rather "What are you?" In the context of external demands to define and categorise oneself, the legacy of stereotypical representations of migrant and other minorities has provided one inroad to the identity work (see Hatfield 2005, 115–116; Smith 2011, 68).

Apart from explicitly autobiographical comics, several analyses of Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006) point out the relevance of the stereotype for identity work and formation. While persistent racial and racist stereotypes of Asians frame the negotiation of Asian American or Chinese American identity in the comic, scholars have drawn attention to Yang's critical and oppositional use of stereotypes (Gardner 2010; Davis 2013; Oh 2017; Ma 2021). They argue that by mixing together several narratives, visual worlds, and generic conventions from the narrative and rhetoric strategies of *Bildungsroman* and sitcom to the racist stereotypes circulated in cartoons and comics, *American Born Chinese* manages to destabilise stereotypical representations without giving way to simple alternatives (Gardner 2010, 146; Ma 2021). While this rather optimistic view of comics' disruptive power against stereotypes is shared by many, Frederik Byrn Köhlert (2019, 157–187), for example, has problematised it by noting that, in the case of racial stereotypes that are still highly powerful and injurious today, the most effective strategy of subversion might not be deconstruction but "direct and confrontational appropriation" (Köhlert 2019, 170). Using Toufic El Rassi's *Arab in America* (2007), an autobiographical comic that portrays processes of exclusion and racialisation as experienced by the Lebanon-born El Rassi in his home country (the United States), Köhlert shows how the comic, through its insistent yet reflective use of the Arab male stereotype, both unmasks anti-Arab prejudices and furnishes positive identity construction (Köhlert 2019, 187).

## Memory and trauma

In (graphic) life writing, processes of identity formation are inseparable from processes of memory. Accordingly, as highlighted by analyses of *Persepolis* or more recent critically acclaimed works such as *The Best We Could Do* (see McWilliams

2019; Oh 2020; Gusain and Jha 2021), when graphic life narratives reflect upon personal experiences related to migration or engage with family histories of displacement, they can be regarded as cultural memory work – or “graphic spaces of remembrance”, as suggested by Serrano (2021b, 10–11), with reference to Pierre Nora’s concept *lieux de mémoire* – through which migratory subjects, their offspring, or other interlocutors make sense of personal and collective pasts.

The comics form and its affordances when engaging with the past – including, for example, the hybrid, palimpsestic, elliptic, and fragmentary features of graphic narration – have received recurring attention in scholarship on comics and memory, as well as in discussions about memories related to displacement and migration. While Hillary Chute (2016, 192–193) compares graphic narration to archiving and suggests that it “makes the process of assembling, ordering, and preserving intelligible in a way that few forms can”, Caroline Kyungah Hong (2014, 14) sees it as “a powerful analogue for memory”. Analysing *Vietnamerica*, she contends that the comic’s “circular, nonchronological, repetitive structure enacts memory’s fluid patterns and the irregular, always unfinished processes of accessing the past, uncovering histories, and constructing genealogies” (Hong 2014, 14–15; see also Shay 2016). Linking the comics form to memory in a universalistic sense, Hong (2014, 18) proposes that the form carries inventive potential with regard to transhistorical and transnational memory work in particular.

The affordances of comics in rendering and reflecting transnational memories are also discussed by Christina Kraenzle (2020), who views them in the context of German collective memory. With a focus on Birgit Weyhe’s *Madgermanes* (2016), a historical comic that sheds light on the largely overlooked experiences of Mozambican migrant workers in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), her analysis points towards qualities of graphic storytelling – such as the use of several distinct drawing styles and varying layouts or a scrapbook-like incorporation of historical memorabilia – that enable “nuanced memory work” where “questions about the ethics of visualizing transnational or transcultural memories” are also reflected upon (Kraenzle 2020, 231). The interest in comics as embodiments of alternative perspectives or counter-memories to “official histories” related to displacement and community-building in national and transnational settings is another common strand in discussions focusing on the nexus of migration, memory, and comics (among many, see, e.g. Cheurfa 2020; Oh 2020; McKinney 2021). An apt summary of this approach is given by Golnar Nabizadeh (2019, 1) in her book *Representation and Memory in Graphic Novels*, which places significant emphasis on memories related to migration, as she argues that as representations of “personal, political, social, and historical memories . . . comics can help recover marginalised and minority voices from the peripheries of representation”.

The potential of the comics form to bring forth marginalised pasts and activate alternative forms of remembrance are explored in this volume as well. In her chapter, “Absented from his master’s service: Benjamin Franklin House, slavery, and comics”, which draws on her own experiences as an illustrator-researcher, Kremenina Dimitrova reflects upon a project of uncovering the life story of a runaway

slave in 18th-century colonial England. Although archival material regarding this particular case is scarce and insufficient to provide the basis for a biography in the most conventional sense – that is, in the form of a coherent, linear narrative of a life – she does not regard this as a problem but rather argues for non-narrative, experimental, and abstract modes of graphic narration that can not only challenge colonial habits of representing the past but also transform conventions of history-writing as a whole.

In their introduction to *Comics Memory: Archives and Styles*, Maaheen Ahmed and Benoît Crucifix (2018, 3) note that “memory’s presence in comics studies has been closely tied to the concept of trauma”. This statement describes the scholarship on migration-themed comics, too. The discussions about comics’ engagements with the past and their communication of personal and cultural memories have often been focused on trauma, which can be defined as “psychological injury, lasting damage done to individuals or communities by tragic events or severe distress” (Davis and Meretoja 2020, 1). This is, of course, not surprising, since migration or displacement may be caused by tragic and violent events like war and persecution, the process of migration itself may be stressful and traumatising, and migrants may be the targets of traumatising violence, abuse, and microaggressions in host societies.

Yet, this is certainly not the only explanation for the engagement with trauma and traumatic memories in research on comics on migration. As with memory, there has been a tendency to draw attention to comics’ affordances and distinctive multimodal strategies for communicating traumatic experiences, and it has even been implied that the comics form might be more suitable than other art forms when it comes to dealing with the psychological and ethical complexities of trauma. Indeed, as several scholars have shown (e.g. Chute 2016; Earle 2017), there is certainly an intimate connection between graphic narratives and trauma, yet the explanation for this might not be found on the level of the comics form but in the developments of cultural theories and representations of trauma during the last decades. As argued by Davies (2020c, 3) in the introduction to *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage*, “comics have played a particularly significant role in refining the aesthetic patterns that now allow traumatic narratives to be recognized as such in contemporary Western culture”.

Certainly, one of the most influential theorisations of trauma, and of the relationship between trauma and memory in particular, developed by drawing on comics is Marianne Hirsch’s (1992) concept of “post-memory”. In a later formulation, she summarises it as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before, to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up” (Hirsch n.d.). Accordingly, since “the generation after” has no direct, experiential relationship to the past, post-memory is emphatically characterised by “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (Hirsch n.d.). What has made Hirsch’s thinking especially compelling for comics studies is her interest in visual memorial traces of the past, and photography in particular,

as embodiments of post-memory and her notion on the productive relationship between different modes of representation (photography, comics, and verbal narration) in the workings of memory and trauma across generations.

Following Hirsch, many scholars have continued to explore the visual capacities of the comics form to enable reckonings of and reflections upon transnational (family) histories shadowed by trauma. In an analysis of *Vietnamerica*, for example, Mary Goodwin (2015) draws attention to the creative use of maps, landscapes, and other topographical elements in thematising memory's geographical and spatial dimensions and in visualising personal, collective, and generational memories and habits of remembering related to a traumatic past. While traumas related to displacement have most often been discussed in comics studies from the perspective of victims or their offspring, Ann Miller (2015a) has drawn attention to the perspectives of the perpetrators as well. Analysing Morvandiau's *D'Algérie* (2007), which engages with its author's heritage with the French colonial settlers in Algeria, Miller points towards different features of graphic storytelling that enable making the complexities, discrepancies, and omissions in personal and collective memorialisations present in a way that is critical of the colonisers' version of the past yet offers "not disillusion but agency" (Miller 2015a, 88).

As highlighted by the discussions on comics' capacities to reflect upon the complex entanglements of personal and public remembrance, to challenge hegemonic interpretations of the past, and to facilitate the voicing of marginalised memories, memory and remembrance are political matters, particularly if the past is marked by violence, injury, and trauma. Indeed, while comics' engagements with the past may be regarded as identity work through which the migratory subjects reflect upon their migratory heritage or try to get a grip on a past troubled by trauma, narratives of past violence, injustices, and trauma may be mobilised as claims of recognition, reconciliation, and responsibility. Thus, as Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009, 10) suggest, the concept of trauma inhabits a central position in contemporary Western human rights discourse, being a framework of recognition that is "not simply the cause of the suffering that is being treated [but] also a resource that can be used to support a right". When remembrance and comics recollections of past migrations and displacements are approached in terms of readership and the demands that these comics potentially make of their readers and the communities at which they are aimed, the themes of memory and trauma overlap with the themes of witnessing and human rights.

## Witnessing and human rights

While the verb "to witness" refers to an act of seeing or experiencing something happening and "a witness" is a person who can provide testimony based on experiential knowledge, in scholarship on migration-themed comics (and in contemporary comics studies more broadly) the term is mostly employed in relation to events and circumstances characterised by violence, suffering, and trauma. In the case of migration-themed comics, witnessing, in other words, is understood as speaking

and visualising the (painful) “truth” of migration, a practice that is mostly associated with documentary comics and has significant ethical and political gravity.

While comics’ visual-verbal strategies of configuring testimony have been discussed extensively since the wide scholarly attention to *Maus* in the 1990s, a particularly influential formulation in recent discussions has been Hillary Chute’s *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (2016). In the book, the development of documentary comics is studied in connection to war and crises in the 20th century and earlier, with specific attention to the affordances of the comics form to perform “visual witnessing” in the face of (past) atrocities. Recently, comics’ capacities to convey visual testimony have been noted as especially palpable in the growing number of “detention comics” that attend to migrant incarceration and map places of confinement located on the fringes of nation-states and their urban centres. One of these is “At Work Inside Our Detention Centres: A Guard’s Story” (Olle and Wallman 2014), a journalistic online comic based on interviews with a former guard at the notorious detention facilities in Australia and published by *The Global Mail*. Nabizadeh (2016, 355; see also Humphrey 2016) argues that while the comic literally “carves new spaces of visibility” by graphically materialising places where representatives of the media are not allowed to enter and that are carefully kept out of public view, it simultaneously performs vital human rights work by foregrounding detention centres’ lived realities in a way that challenges existing assumptions about the detainees and gives recognition to them as individuals.

Witnessing and visibility are central themes in many comics based on fieldwork on actual sites. From the perspective of a reporter-witness (Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* is often regarded as the starting point of this type of “refugee comics”; see Davies 2020b, 385), these document life in migrant encampments or shed light on border-crossings and management in “border regions”, such as the Mediterranean or the US–Mexico border. In this volume, comics journalists’ work of witnessing is explored in Aura Nikkilä’s chapter, “To see and to show: Photography, drawing, and refugee representation in comics journalism on refugee camps”. She examines the ways in which photographs and photographing as well as drawing are reflected upon in three journalistic comics that report from official or unofficial refugee camps. Analysing the dynamics of power in the encounters between the comics journalists and the camp inhabitants, Nikkilä considers the visibilities that refugees are given in these comics and whether their representations move beyond tropes of refugees as victims or as threats, as is familiar from humanitarian communication and (xenophobic) media discourse.

While Chute (2016, 30) is reluctant to associate comics’ visual witnessing (as analysed in relation to Spiegelman, Sacco, and others) with human rights discourse, arguing that it is not about a “statutory conception of rights, or . . . lobbying for justice”, others have done just that by linking contemporary (migration-themed) comics to discourses, narratives, and representational practices related to human rights, such as “humanitarian witnessing” (Scherr 2015b, 2021) and “advocacy” (Mickwitz 2020a, 277; 2020b, 459), or by using formulations like “graphic human

rights writing” (Salmi 2016) or “the human rights graphic novel” (Nayar 2021). Accordingly, although only some migration-themed comics have such a direct relationship to humanitarian work and human rights organisations, such as the NGO-produced “crisis comics” discussed by Smith or the documentary long-form comic *Liebe deinen Nächsten: Auf Rettungsfahrt im Mittelmeer an Bord der Aquarius* (2017) by Gaby von Borstel and Peter Eickmeyer, which portrays the work of the humanitarian organisation SOS Mediterranee, they are – through their subject matter as well as through their strategies of representation – nevertheless embedded in what may be called the cultural realm of human rights, where jurisdictional and institutional norms and conceptions of rights and responsibility are shaped, reflected upon, and negotiated (see McClennen and Slaughter 2009).

A recurring issue in discussions on comics that document the plight of migrants concerns the ethical questions related to the mobilisation of representations of pain and suffering, a central feature of “the social imaginary of normative human rights” (Moore 2015, 7) at large. It may be argued that documentation of migrants’ physical and psychological suffering is required to shed light on their situation, to bear evidence of the violent operations of border regimes and migration management, and to evoke and strengthen empathy and solidarity in host populations; in the most optimistic scenario, this may raise critical awareness of struggles related to migration, strengthen the societal position of migrants, and contribute to improvements in migration laws and politics. Yet, representations of suffering may also victimise migrants, making their helplessness and powerlessness appear as (essential) properties of their subjectivity rather than circumstances characterising their position within unequal legal-political frameworks. Ethical questions also arise with regard to production and reception. If a human rights-oriented comic is based on interviews or other close engagements with individuals in a vulnerable position, how should artists deal with the consequence that their attempts to communicate other people’s painful experiences and deplorable situations to a wider public may “bring pain back into being” (Scherr 2015b, 187)? And finally, whose interest does recounting others’ suffering serve: those who are or have been in pain or those who can observe the suffering from a distance and be disturbed, moved, or even titillated by it?

In this volume, the ethical and political implications of representations of migrant suffering are discussed in Anna Vuorinne’s chapter, “Tears of a refugee: Melodramatic life writing and Reinhard Kleist’s *Der Traum von Olympia*”. Using the “semi-fictional biography” of the Somalian sprinter and refugee Samia Yusuf Omar as an example, she proposes the concept of “melodramatic life writing” to describe a common mode of narration in contemporary refugee comics, where the representation of “real” circumstances, people, and experiences merges with the melodramatic rhetoric of Manichean morality and excessive emotionality. While she shares the common scepticism towards the critical potential of conventional melodramatic narratives that often run the risk of oversimplifying ethico-political issues and naturalising the position of underprivileged individuals and groups, her conclusion is that scholars should not turn away from conventions and conventionality but

rather ask what kinds of new or alternative uses and interpretations might emerge from and through a dialogue with them.

Indeed, migrants' painful experiences and struggles may also be represented in such a way that, instead of undermining their agency and producing the opposition of "victims" and "saviours", it foregrounds migrant resilience and strives for building solidarities across different social positions. Issues of resilience and solidarity are at the core of Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Wictorin's chapter, "Feminist comics activism: Stories about migrant women in Sweden by Amalia Alvarez and Daria Bogdanska", where the intersection of witnessing and human rights is explored from the perspective of feminist activism. Reading Alvarez's and Bogdanska's comics as documentary representations of migrant women's struggles and resistance in Swedish society, Nordenstam and Wallin Wictorin argue that their comics are activist art with both educational and empowering purposes. While raising awareness of the discrimination and abuse faced by migrant women in Sweden, they give minority readers who might have similar experiences the resources to fight against race- and gender-based oppression.

As scholarship on human rights-oriented comics (and especially on Sacco's work) has pointed out, comics may provide a platform for critiques of hegemonic human rights discourse. By making tropes, conventions, and norms of human rights discourse visible, comics may invite their reader to an ethical contemplation of how the suffering of others is framed and what effects these framings have (Scherr 2015a, 2015b). Ultimately, this may engage readers in new practices of reading about conflicts, displacement, and suffering and apprehending human rights at large (Salmi 2016). In recent studies on migration-themed comics, their subversive potential with regard to human rights representation has been discussed most extensively in relation to "highly depersonalized" (Rifkind 2017, 650) strategies of representation. While differing in their theoretical orientations and perspectives, these studies share a common interest in the "space of migration" (Vågnes 2015, 162), as they draw attention from representations of displaced individuals that give "a human face to suffering" (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 3) to representations of geographies, infrastructures, and built environments that shape and are shaped by migration.

In her studies on the representations of demolished environments and ruins, Scherr suggests that "draw[ing] the ground into a web of affective figuration that we have long associated with bodies" (Scherr 2020, 475–476; see also Scherr 2021) might help readers better grasp the scales of violence and destruction that cause suffering and displacement. With a similar focus on the built environment, in a reading of Tings Chak's *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention* (2014), Rifkind (2020) proposes that renderings of the carceral architectures of migrant detention may work both as a spatial-experiential-affective simulation of migrant incarceration and as a critique of contemporary migration regimes. If these examples are primarily concerned with how comics may materialise the violence inflicted on or by certain places and environments, Davies' (2019) discussion on "the braided geographies of refugee narratives" points towards the strategies available in graphic

narration to resist spatial configurations of violence. Focusing on the “spatial grammar” of comics that allows “braided, multi-directional relationships between different geographic spaces” to materialise, he argues for the potential of comics to challenge violent border regimes and suggests new “counter-geographic” and “decolonising imaginaries” (Davies 2019, 130–131).

While the sentiment of “spaces and places, not faces” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2017; see also Davies 2019, 129) characterises the approach of all three scholars, they differ in their takes on the empathetic possibility conventionally associated with human rights narratives. Both Scherr and Rifkind propose that the power of human rights graphic narratives representing the built environment instead of people lies in their potential to reinvigorate and reassess affective sensibilities to recognise the pain and suffering of others. However, Davies (2019; see also 2020a) remains more wary towards comics’ empathetic possibilities, insisting that the critical human rights work, or “decolonial impulse”, of migration-themed comics needs to be discussed in terms beyond empathy if the scholarship wants to address comics’ potential to challenge problematic conventions of human rights representation. This reflects a broader tendency in discussions on migration-themed comics, where comics’ potential and strategies to create and mobilise empathy as well as other readerly responses have been recurring topics of interest and debate.

## Readerly engagements and empathy

As our discussion has already indicated, the meanings of comics’ representations of migration are related not only to *what* they represent and *how* they do it but also to their *effects* on their audiences, or to “comics’ transitive potential . . . its ability to *do* things, to intervene in a reader’s world” (Scherr 2015b, 184, italics in the original). The scholarship on migration-themed comics has been deeply invested in examining comics’ possible effects on their readers, ranging from their manner of challenging predefined assumptions and stereotypical notions related to migrants to their way of offering alternative perspectives on migration image-ries circulated in other media and to their means of introducing renewed forms of political reasoning and emotional attunement. While many comics directed at Western non-migrant readers evidently aim at inducing empathetic reactions and hospitality towards migrants, comics may be instrumentalised for completely different purposes as well, for example, producing hostility, fear, and hatred. Echoing wider debates on the relationship between (narrative) art and empathy in general and on affective economies of human rights representation in particular, the discussions about comics’ transitive potential have, however, 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; related to that, the discussions have also dealt with the critical potential and limitations of empathy as a moral emotion.

Understood as identification with another person, an early example of empathy in migration-themed comics can be found in Gillian Whitlock’s (2006) discussion

of *Persepolis*. Drawing on Scott McCloud's idea that comics' simplistic or "iconic" representation of human faces carries the power of promoting readerly identification, she argues that the iconic or cartoonish portrayal of the characters in *Persepolis* makes them appear as "icons through which even those of us placed as 'the other ones,' outside the frame, may feel an empathic association" (Whitlock 2006, 976–977). Also reflecting upon the iconicity of characters' faces in *Persepolis*, Joseph Darda (2013, 39–40) takes a more critical perspective vis-à-vis McCloud's theorisation. According to Darda, McCloud's model of readerly engagement – where the iconic representation of a comics character is regarded as akin to the "mind-image" that readers have of themselves – is characterised by narcissism rather than by empathic attunement and ethical obligation towards another person. For Darda (2013, 41), the ethical value of Satrapi's comic, and graphic narratives in general, does not lie in their capacity to suggest similarity and identification but instead rests in their "communicating proximity rather than sameness or categorical difference".

In a similar vein, Davies (2018) problematises the notion of empathetic identification, or the direct access to the experiences and emotional life of another person. According to him, the problem with the idea of empathetic identification in the case of migration-themed comics, which often deal with difficult or even traumatic experiences of displaced people, is, initially, that it assumes "access to the first-hand experience of the trauma of the immigrant experience" and, secondly, that it proposes a "conditional acceptance of the stranger", as identification is the only way to recognition and hospitality (Davies 2018, n.p.).

In this volume, the implications of identification are discussed in Christina M. Knopf's chapter, "The politics of inversion in *Americatown*: Limits in public pedagogy". With a focus on the strategy of inversion, which is identified as a typical trope in antiracist texts, Knopf discusses "role reversal" in *Americatown* (2015) by Bradford Winters, Larry Cohen, and Daniel Irizarri. Knopf examines how the roles of "the immigrant" and "the native" are flipped in the comic as a way of inviting a white, natural-born US American readership to identify with immigrants, especially those with a Latin American background. Knopf concludes,

By identifying with the American immigrant, readers [of *Americatown*] may gain insight as to what drives people to cross borders, broaden their perspective of what it means to be an undocumented or irregularly immigrated resident, to see how immigration is a culturally racialized concept, and/or what it is to be excluded or subjugated based on demographic characteristics.

Yet she remains sceptical about the comic's critical potential. Its pedagogical value is equivocal, she argues, not only because the inverted narrative reaffirms racial hierarchies and stereotypical conceptions regarding migration and migrant populations but also because the inversion remains incomplete in its triumphalist ideas of the United States and its citizens.

Even if there is a common tendency to regard empathy as a positive readerly response, it carries several complications, especially if it is understood in terms of

identification with “the strange” or “the unfamiliar”. Nevertheless, several scholars have noted that identification might not be the only or even the best way to conceptualise empathy. In his analysis of foreignness in Tan’s *The Arrival* and Paula Bulling’s *Im Land der Frühaufsteher* (2012), Singer (2020) approaches empathy through the idea of simulation. Arguing that the experience of foreignness or alienation is a central theme in both comics, which focus on the experiences of newly arrived immigrants, he proposes that the theme is communicated not only through the comics’ content but also through their narrative and visual strategies. While noting that these strategies are aimed at evoking experiences of strangeness or confusion in readers, Singer does not assume a correspondence between their experiences and those of the immigrant protagonists. Instead, he suggests, echoing Darda’s viewpoint, that such strategies place those in proximity to each other.

If Singer’s article takes part in the debates on empathy in a somewhat indirect manner, Rifkind’s (2020) article on “compassion comics” – discussed earlier in relation to the representation of the built environment in detention comics – is an explicit intervention. Similarly, steering beyond identification and towards a simulative and self-reflective understanding of comics’ affective workings, her term “compassion comics” describes a “dual recognition” that migrant detention comics may evoke as they “draw their subjects and readers closer together in a more engaged, intimate relationship of knowledge of the other and . . . the self” (Rifkind 2020, 301). The attempt of expanding and complicating the conception of empathy in comics studies guides Aura Nikkilä and Anna Vuorinne’s (2020) discussion on empathy’s different varieties in Hanneriina Moisseinen’s war- and displacement-themed comic *The Isthmus* (2016). They argue that “empathy should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon of imagination, feeling, and understanding” that, at best, takes the form of openness towards difference and is characterised not only by emotional and embodied resonance but by intellectual reflection as well (Nikkilä and Vuorinne 2020, 2). In sum, while these scholars acknowledge that readerly empathy may take the form of mere projection of readers’ own emotions, experiences, and assumptions onto others, they maintain that it still has the potential for the cultivation of more critical and other-directed sensibilities.

Notwithstanding the possible complexity of empathy and its value as a moral feeling, empathy is only one possible readerly response evoked by comics’ representations of migration. In the final chapter of this volume, “Intolerable fictions: Composing refugee realities in comics”, Dominic Davies takes this idea as one of his starting points as he calls for alternatives to authenticity-centred and empathy-oriented models of analysing refugee comics. He argues that if we, as scholars, want to reach a more comprehensive understanding of refugee comics’ critical potential as representations, it is necessary to expand our analytical focus from notions of documentation and authenticity to notions of “fictionality” and “composition”, keeping in mind that empathy may not be the only answer when reflecting upon politically transformative readerly responses. With the help of Susan Sontag and Jacques Rancière, as well as Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock’s comic, *Vanni: A Family’s Struggle Through the Sri Lankan Conflict* (2019), he sketches an alternative approach

to documentary refugee comics, where the focus is not on “a straight line between their readerly perception and an ambiguously defined political action” but instead on “new configurations of what can be thought of, what can be seen, and . . . what action might be possible”.

## From representations to other uses of comics

Representation is a social activity, and therefore comics representing migration are always entangled with various other practices. Comics take part in political debates around migration; they negotiate identities in transnational and transcultural settings; they formulate recollections and archival traces of the past displacements into histories of human mobility; they produce knowledge about current migrants’ struggles; they contribute to discourses of rights and responsibility; and they appeal to their readers’ intellect, emotions, and morals in different ways. While the cultural, social, and political work that comics do vis-à-vis migration can be perceived on the textual level – that is, *on the page* (or, in the case of webcomics, on the screen) – it is crucial to turn the perspective “*beyond the page*” (Scorer 2020, 2; italics original) as well, to look into what is done with and through comics by different actors in various forms of social interaction related to migration. In the following sections, we turn our attention to the practices and processes where comics and their representations are put to use and, more precisely, to the kind of research on comics and migration that foregrounds not the texts but the practices surrounding them. The focus could also be described with reference to the different actors involved in these practices.

Writing about refugee comics in the framework of advocacy, where comics take it upon themselves to speak for others, Mickwitz proposes that they cannot be studied only on a textual level (Mickwitz 2020a, 293; 2020b, 459). Instead, they need to be examined by taking into account the different actors associated with their production and consumption – “subjects, creators, publishers, funding bodies, readers, and critics” (Mickwitz 2020b, 459) – as parts of power-infused networks of relations. In her mapping, Mickwitz (2020a) describes several different refugee comics with regard not only to narrative or representational patterns but also to their production contexts and relations to different fields, such as human rights work and comics publishing. Turning our focus to the practices surrounding comics and migration, we take seriously Mickwitz’s call for a multifaceted study of refugee comics, yet we also hope to extend the outlook on the entanglements of comics and migration from a broader perspective.

Many of the chapters in this volume open up views on those aspects of the production and consumption of comics that Mickwitz anticipates. They provide insight into the creative processes of artists and the political aspirations of organisations that use comics. It is clear, however, that the perspective on comics as representations is never far off. In her chapter, “Humans on the move: Some thoughts about approaching migration as a journalist in comics”, journalist Taina Tervonen uses her extensive experience of reportage on migration in both Finland and

France to discuss her thought processes and ethical considerations when first doing journalism in the comics form with artist Jeff Pourquié. Tervonen's description of the creative process and journalistic work provide explanations for the representational choices visible in comics. Even more so, the discussion provides the reader with insight into the journalistic field and the preconditions of working with comics journalism. In the following, we will investigate other areas of comics production: first, studies of NGO-produced comics, which often represent the practice of advocacy; second, the practice of comics workshops, providing novice creators with the opportunity to produce comics art; and, third, comics and migration in the field of education. This summarises the current state of research into the uses of comics among different actors.

### NGO-produced comics and advocacy

The connection between the information provided by and the readerly reactions induced by the representations in comics on migration needs to be approached in terms of what purposes comics on migration are produced for and by whom. Advocacy is one answer to the first question, and in the scholarly literature on comics, the most common answer to the second is probably PositiveNegatives (see Burrell and Hörschelmann 2019; Davies 2019; Precup and Manea 2020; Wong et al. 2020). Under the motto "True Stories, Drawn from Life", since 2012 this non-profit organisation has produced comics and animations on humans' experiences in situations of conflict and crisis. Many of the comics focus on the lives and destinies of refugees. In the stories, the individual human being and their experiences provide the lens for approaching and raising awareness about global social issues. One of the reasons for such relatively widespread academic interest is the organisation's explicitly voiced methodology for comics production, in addition to its activists' academic connections, especially those of its founder, the anthropologist and former UN official and photojournalist Benjamin Worku-Dix (aka Benjamin Dix).

The creation of personal stories is based on collaborative and participatory practices (Wong et al. 2020) that have been regarded as producing "horizontal agency" among the different parties involved in the process (Precup and Manea 2020, 262). The comics may be commissioned by partner organisations or researchers. They are based on interviews with subjects who are also involved in subsequent phases of production. When possible, the subjects can comment on scripts and drafts and are given access to the final products. In addition, an aim of skill-sharing may also be on the agenda, as in the case of the animation "Dear Habib" by Majid Adin and Team Tumult about a young, unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan who settles in the United Kingdom. The subject, Habib, was not only an informant but also a participant in the production and thus given the opportunity to acquire some skill in animation. (Wong et al. 2020, 318). While these means to incorporate subjects in the production process and to ensure that their voices are heard show that PositiveNegatives pays significant attention to the problematic aspects of advocacy, the

fact that the stories are always mediated is a concern that cannot be ignored. For example, while Kathy Burrell and Kathrin Hörschelmann (2019, 60) laud the three comics of “A Perilous Journey”, based on the stories of Syrian male refugees in Scandinavia and published in 2015, for their decolonising potential based on the centring of the Syrian men’s perspectives and knowledge, they also state that the comics, due to their “western context” of production and consumption, “are, and can only ever be, just partially radical in their decoloniality”.

The stories collected by PositiveNegatives have been regarded as a shared, transnational “memory space” (Precup and Manea 2020) and a “decolonial archive” (Burrell and Hörschelmann 2019). Concerning this collection or archive of knowledge, which has its very concrete form on the PositiveNegatives homepage, Precup and Manea (2020, 268) state that a “narrative blueprint” can be found there, despite the focus being on individuals’ personal experiences. On the one hand, this attests to the similarities of routes and experiences of being a refugee, and on the other, it risks the presentation of a universalised image of the refugee and of human suffering due to conflict more generally. The stories follow a general pattern of first outlining a peaceful beginning (“a space of nostalgia”; Precup and Manea 2020, 268), which is disturbed by conflict and disorder, followed by an insecure arrival in safety (in Europe in the refugee stories). According to Precup and Manea, the stories do not pay sufficient attention to the political circumstances of the protagonists or their different locations. The narrative similarities, however, provide for a predictability of and complementarity between stories: “where some of the stories stop, others begin; where some of the narrators skip details or cut the story short, others provide more fully-fledged accounts” (Precup and Manea 2020, 265). Thus, the accumulating collection of stories can also be seen as a means to push a more common message concerning social issues besides the testimonials and personal messages of the individual stories.

A central aspect of the activism and advocacy of PositiveNegatives seems to be the care put into the distribution of completed stories. Also in this case, as in the production of the stories, collaborative practices are crucial. PositiveNegatives has cooperated with large media outlets. For example, the comics of “A Perilous Journey” were published in *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom and *Aftenposten* in Norway and exhibited at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, and later some parts were exhibited in London at the Brunei Gallery in the School of African and Oriental Studies (Davies 2019, 125). A concerted effort to reach the political elite and affect government policies was the submission of the comic “Abike’s Story” to the UK parliament in 2015. This comic, on human trafficking, was “used to humanize the policy papers which formed part of the UK’s Modern-Day Slavery Act. These legislative reforms were successfully passed by the UK Parliament later that year”, according to PositiveNegatives’ Sara Wong and colleagues (2020, 321).

Wong and colleagues (2020, 324–325) have also highlighted the use of PositiveNegatives’ comics as learning resources in pedagogical settings. Not only are many of the comics attempts to popularise research findings, but also a special platform for such materials has been set up as part of the PositiveNegatives website,

PosNeg Learning. Drawing on the experiences of the use of the comic “Almaz’s Story” vis-à-vis modern-day slavery, trafficking, and exploitation in one classroom in Kinshasa, Congo, Wong et al. illustrate the functions of comics as pedagogical tools. Based on student responses, they suggest that comics reading leads to different responses, including empathy with the protagonist, a willingness to learn more about a phenomenon, and attempts to find political solutions to global problems.

There is, of course, an abundance of other NGO-produced comics dealing with migration. In contrast to the PositiveNegatives project, these comics have been commissioned and produced by an organisation or a project for whom the production of a comic is only one small part of their activities. Some international examples are: Karrie Fransman’s “Over Under Sideways Down” (2014), produced in cooperation with the Red Cross in the United Kingdom (see Miller 2015b); the Swedish comic book *Vi ska ses igen, Sanam* (We will meet again, Sanam; Ekman and Bergting 2013) produced by the children’s rights organisation Friends; the comics of the French NGO Solidarités International’s “Meantime” project in 2017 (see Mickwitz 2020a, 281); and the project “El viaje más caro – The Most Costly Journey” in Vermont, USA, connecting local migrant farmworkers and comics artists (see Bennett et al. 2021). Research on such one-off attempts by advocacy groups to bring forth their message in “crisis comics” (Smith 2011) is scarce.

The object of Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto and Iván Facundo Rubinstein’s chapter “From representations of suffering migrants to appreciation of the Mexican American legacy in the United States: The NGO-produced comics *Historias migrantes*” is the change of politics over the two volumes of the comic book *Historias migrantes* published by the organisation Finestra Gestoría Cultural, active in Zacatecas, Mexico. Their analysis shows how the reception of the first volume, which provided a gloomy picture of migration from Mexico to the United States, resulted in a second volume that approached migration from the more positive perspective of portraying Mexican influence and culture in the US context. In this case, as in other advocacy comics, the voice of migrants is indirect, mediated by research, interviews, or feedback, as with *Historias migrantes*, and comics artists putting it all in visual form at the end. Another category of comics comprises those produced by migrants themselves, such as “Miksi?” described in the beginning of this chapter.

The voice used in a Finnish antiracist comic is the topic of Olli Löytty’s chapter, “Racist and national(ist) symbols in a Finnish antiracist comics zine”. The comics zine *Nyt riittää!/Enough is Enough!* was produced as a collective effort in the Finnish comics field as a reaction to the country’s harshening political climate and outright racist and xenophobic reactions to newly arrived asylum seekers in the autumn of 2015. Analysing the use of “sticky” symbols of nationalism and racism in the zine’s comics and reflecting upon his own position and the zine’s production in a Finnish context marked by whiteness, Löytty finds that the zine broadly represents a form of antiracism that denounces the racist and xenophobic expressions of fellow Finns in the country’s local context of whiteness. However, while the zine’s comics

represent a hospitable attitude towards newcomers, only a few examples broaden the scope of the antiracist discourse in this racially defined national space.

## Comics workshops and self-expression

The “Illustrating Me” project is one example (as is the activity described by Fitzgerald in her comic *Drawn to Berlin*, mentioned before) of comics workshops enabling migrants and refugees themselves to produce comics and give expression to their own thoughts and voices. Drawings as a means of self-expression are at the centre of the activities of the Dessins sans papiers association that has organised workshops with refugees in France since 2016 (Figure 1.2). Some results of these workshops have been published as books mixing visual and verbal narration in creative ways, being more reminiscent of picture books or artists’ books than comic books (see Adem 2018; Hagar 2018; Ndepe Tahar 2018).

Another case is the project “Graphic Lives: Telling Bangladeshi Migrant Women’s Stories through Graphic Narratives”, described in Sarah McNicol’s research (2018, 2019, 2020). Part research project, part educational program, the participants – nine women born in Bangladesh and living in the same community in the United Kingdom – “explored their own life stories and the historical narratives of their communities through workshops on life history, cross-cultural storytelling and digital skills” (McNicol 2018, 284). The participants were to produce their own digital comics.

While the “Illustrating Me” workshops usually have lasted only a few hours, the “Graphic Lives” project was considerably more comprehensive with its five-month period of weekly workshops. In both cases, however, the preparation for comics creation has included familiarisation with visual and comics-specific narrative strategies and character design. Unlike the “Illustrating Me” workshops, which focus solely on drawing, the “Graphic Lives” project had a multimedia orientation, as the use of photographs in the comics was possible. As McNicol notes with reference to earlier studies, a lack of drawing experience and insecurities concerning drawing skills may be off-putting for some participants. However, McNicol (2019, 240) explains that the women of “Graphic Lives” were “open to the idea of drawing”. The results of the “Illustrating Me” workshops also show that drawing does not need to be a stumbling block.

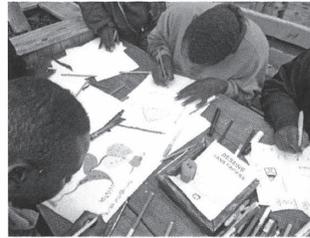
In addition to improving digital skills, the process of making comics was also a means for the participants to improve their English language skills (McNicol 2018). McNicol’s analyses of selected comics show how the medium proved to be a good way to discuss issues that otherwise were not easily expressed. The multimodality characteristic of comics narration allowed the participants to deal with traumatic issues in a way that could be nuanced and in accord with their own wishes. The coexistence of multiple images in comics also allowed for a depiction of the copresence of the past and present in stories where the women were telling about their identities. In the end, the novice creators in the workshops, new to making comics, “felt that the act of creating comics, and of reading one another’s, offered them

# DESSINS SANS PAPIERS

**DESSINS SANS PAPIERS est un collectif qui organise des ateliers de dessins dans des camps de réfugiés et des centres d'hébergement.**

## LES ATELIERS

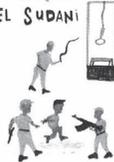
Ceux que nous avons rencontrés viennent du Soudan, du Tchad, du Mali, de Guinée Conakry, d'Érythrée, d'Éthiopie, du Tibet, d'Irak, d'Irak, de Syrie, ou d'Afghanistan. Leurs dessins nous montrent des milices qui tirent sur des hommes, des mers houleuses, des oiseaux fatigués... Ils nous expliquent ce qu'ils ont fui et pourquoi ils ont besoin de notre hospitalité.



## LES LIVRES

Après un recueil de dessins collectif, DSP a publié «Le Voyage de Hafiz El Sudani» de Hafiz Adem, et «Le journal de Mickey Le Vieux» de Mohamed Ndepe Tahar, le carnet de route d'un mineur isolé, de Douala jusqu'à Nantes. «Livre 1 : Darfour» de Magdi Hagar est le 4e titre de cette collection de témoignages.

LE VOYAGE  
DE HAFIZ  
EL SUDANI



LE JOURNAL  
DE MICKEY  
LE VIEUX



## COMMENT NOUS SOUTENIR ?

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[dessinssanspapiers.wordpress.com](https://dessinssanspapiers.wordpress.com)

LIVRE 1  
DARFOUR



Pour nous contacter, organiser un atelier avec nous, commander des livres :  
[dessinssanspapiers@gmail.com](mailto:dessinssanspapiers@gmail.com)

**FIGURE 1.2** Flyer from the Dessins sans papiers organisation. Distributed at the Angoulême comics festival in 2019.

*Source:* Reproduced with the permission of Dessins sans papiers.

ways to express memories that were difficult to discuss in other circumstances and media” (McNicol 2020, 100).

McNicol (2019, 240–241) is critical of the viewpoint, assumed in other projects involving participant research, that “Graphic Lives” would “give” the participants a voice. Instead, she carefully states that the project’s function was to ensure that

the participants mastered “narrative resources” that enabled them to tell their own stories in different ways “in their own voices”. This conceptual difference is illustrative of a central dimension in most productions of comics in relation to migration: who has the power to give voice to others, and who has the possibility to use one’s own voice? Research needs to pay attention to the processes of mediation and facilitation in different settings, such as the comics field at large or more specific fields, such as NGO-produced comics or even community comics workshops.

## Comics in education

In their chapter, “Collaborative work, migrant representativity, and racism”, Adrián Groglopo and Amalia Alvarez raise the issue of representation and the possibilities for migrant, racialised minorities making themselves heard in Swedish society and the Swedish comics field. The discussion (partly in dialogue form) presents their cooperation on the antiracist dictionary published by the association Antirasistiska Akademin (Antiracist Academy). They propound that there is an acute need for antiracist comics produced by those having experiences of racism and the political awareness of their situation. With regard to the dictionary project with the aim of popularising scholarly antiracist discussions and terminology, Groglopo and Alvarez point at the power of cartoons to bring an ironic perspective to complement the social scientific scholarly discourse.

As Groglopo and Alvarez’s case illustrates, similar to the results from the studies on comics workshops, comics and cartoons are often seen to have great educational potential. While the purpose of comics and cartoons may be that of complementing written educational material or adding alternative, critical, or humorous perspectives to it, as is the case with the dictionary, comics are also frequently used as educational tools in their own right. In a recent overview of comics pedagogy, Susan E. Kirtley, Antero Garcia, and Peter E. Carlson (2020, 12; original italics) usefully divide the educational uses of comics into the following categories: “Teaching *with* comics; Teaching *about* comics; Teaching *through producing* comics; and Teaching comics *production* as a means of processing thinking and learning”. The antiracist dictionary points to the potential of “teaching with comics”, whereas the comics workshops illustrate the fact that these categories of pedagogy are often intertwined: to be able to create comics, the participating novice creators are first provided with some education “about comics”. Only after that is the educational potential of learning “through producing comics” realised.

While comics pedagogy occurs in different guises and educators are drawn to comics for various reasons, an assumption that often seems to inform educational uses of comics is that, in general, they represent a more accessible or engaging type of material than written text and are thus attractive also to those who shun the latter because of, for example, rudimentary reading skills or because they are learning a new language. While this might appear as a somewhat depreciative or uninformed view on comics reading, it is, however, accompanied by an appreciation of comics’ formal qualities, that is, their inherent multimodality and potential

value in developing learners' "multiliteracies". As Robin L. Danzak (2011, 189) summarises the term coined by The New London Group, "This broad conceptualization of literacy highlights diversity, both of texts and of the individuals who create and interact with them". While describing the competences required in the globalised, multimodal, and multimedial textual environment, as well as emphasising the cultural and linguistic diversity of those who participate in it, the term proposes a comprehensive conceptualisation of literacy that extends from language skills and textual comprehension to a critical civic practice that is required when navigating in the world (Danzak 2011, 189). In this framework, comics are recognised as a valuable pedagogical resource that not only may help to develop learners' skills in critical multimodal reading and engage them in pressing global issues, such as migration, but can also provide a tool for language and literacy education in multilingual and culturally diverse settings.

Reflecting the confidence in the educational potential of comics' multimodality as well as the common view of comics providing alternative perspectives to refugee representation in the mainstream media, Claudia Deetjen (2018) discusses the usefulness of Joe Sacco's "The Unwanted" (2010a, 2010b) as a tool for teaching multimodal reading and critical media literacy to students of English as a foreign language. In a similar vein, Michael D. Boatright (2010) deliberates on the pedagogical potential of three migration-themed comics (*The Arrival*, *The Four Immigrants Manga*, and *American Born Chinese*) in classrooms teaching English as the first language, examining them from the perspective of critical literacy pedagogy, where the focus is on developing learners' abilities to detect and critically evaluate ideologies and power relations in texts. Discussing the insights provided by these comics regarding the experiences and histories of immigration, as well as their possible biases or blind spots, he concludes that the comics provide teachers with a "provocative resource" in "developing an analytical awareness of graphic novels' power to represent immigrant experiences and how these representations privilege certain immigrant experiences while leaving countless other immigrant experiences untold" (Boatright 2010, 475). Students' analyses of comics may help them understand broader historical and social phenomena, suggests Cian T. McMahon (2014), describing the successful use of cartoons on migration in a course called "Great Migrations in Modern Human History". In addition to enhancing active learning, the use of digitised political cartoons, originally published before 1925, provided American students with a transnational outlook on migration as well as a means to compare historical discourses with current debates on migration.

In addition to suggestions to use migration-themed comics in educational settings, there is ample research in this field. Most of the research can be described as having a predominant interest in different kinds of literacies among various groups of learners, but the studied uses extend that context. Given the interest in literacy, it might seem a bit surprising that a common denominator for many studies is Tan's wordless comic *The Arrival* (see, e.g. Pantaleo and Bomphray 2011; Rhoades et al. 2015; Hanna 2022). Tan's graphic narrative is also the centrepiece of the most extensive study in the field: Evelyn Arizpe, Teresa Colomer, Carmen

Martínez-Roldán's, et al. *Visual Journeys Through Wordless Narratives: An International Inquiry with Immigrant Children and The Arrival* (2015). This ambitious project, carried out in multiple locations – Scotland, Spain, the USA, Australia, and Italy – explored visual literacy with wordless narratives read collectively by groups of children, among whom were both immigrant and native children and, consequently, children with different linguistic competencies. The aim was to study how the wordless comic (or picture book) enables children's language learning and augments their cultural understanding. The wordless narrative turned out to be a good tool for language learning: in combination with the encouraging, facilitated space of the reading groups, the wordless mode helped children overcome linguistic barriers. The migration-themed visual narrative also provided the children with an opportunity to reflect on their own migrant identities as well as on more general, hegemonic understandings of migration in society. The broad pedagogical conclusion that the authors (2015, 199) draw on the basis of the study is that the education of immigrant children must be inclusive and take notice of the competencies and knowledge that these children have. Furthermore, this is made possible by the use of multimodal materials that engage children regardless of their differing linguistic competencies.

The "Graphic Journeys" project, which was targeted at children who learn English as another language and carried out in a middle school in Florida, had a similar objective as Arizpe and colleagues' project, as it aimed not only at developing learners' linguistic skills but also at leading them to reflect upon their migratory experiences and heritage as part of their identities (Danzak 2011). The pedagogical methods were different, however, since the main focus of the "Graphic Journeys" project was not on reading but on making comics. With the production of full-colour hardcover graphic stories as its final target, the six-month-long educational project included several kinds of preparative exercises in multimodal writing and reading, which included the keeping of personal journals, reading comics together, and conducting interviews with families. Reflecting on the implications of the project, Danzak (2011, 195) concludes that while developing competence in language and literacy, it gave the participants an experience that their perspectives and stories matter and provided them with skills to express themselves creatively.

While these projects evidence the pedagogical benefits of comics in transcultural and multilingual settings, Helen Hanna (2022) gives an important reminder of the possible limitations and blind spots that these kinds of educational approaches might entail. Similarly to Arizpe and colleagues, Hanna carried out an empirical research project where *The Arrival* – chosen as education/research material for its "potential to offer representation and the opportunity for storytelling" – was used as a tool for teaching and researching critical literacy among migrant primary school learners in South Africa (Hanna 2022, 43). The fieldwork steered her research in a new direction, however, as she became interested in the learners' (Black migrant children) reluctance to engage in conversations about certain topics with her ("a White researcher from a former coloniser"), most importantly the topic of race. She insists that teachers and researchers working with children's literacy education

should acknowledge refusal, or “silence and absence”, as genuine expressions of children’s agency and allow them to discuss and interpret reading materials freely without “trying to control the process to the extent that they [researchers and teachers] define the narrative” (Hanna 2022, 47).

While comics’ educational benefits are today framed with rather recent developments, such as the intensified multimodality and transculturality of contemporary media spheres, the idea of using comics as tools of education is not new. Sylvia Kesper-Biermann points to this in her chapter, “The long road to *Almanya*: Comics in language education for ‘guest workers’ in West Germany, 1970s–1980s”. Through a case study of *Feridun: Ein Lesebuch und Sprachprogramm nicht nur für Türken* – an example of language-learning material where comics and cartoons played a prominent role – she sheds light on the ways in which comics were used in immigrant workers’ language education in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s and how the use of comics was motivated in the pedagogical discourse of the time. While the language education through comics was aimed at making the “guest workers” active participants in German society and even at building solidarities between “foreign” and “native” workers, Kesper-Biermann’s analysis of the materials, particularly their illustrations, shows that in fact they only reinforced the assumed differences between “Germans” and “guest workers”, defining the latter through their “fundamental alienness”.

One chapter of the present volume is still to be presented. In the chapter “Contracts via comics: Migrant workers and Thai fishing vessel employment contracts”, Anne Ketola, Eliisa Pitkäsalo, and Robert de Rooy analyse a legal employment contract in comics format produced to prevent labour exploitation and facilitate the fulfilment of the legal rights of migrant employees from Cambodia and Myanmar in Thailand’s fishing industries. They argue that the comics format provides the possibility for comprehension in a situation marked by language differences and that an intelligible, transparent contract may increase awareness of and prohibit corrupted practices. The case it describes brings forth yet another perspective on the practices connecting migration and comics by foregrounding the intersection of comics and legal practices, a subfield of comics production and research that has been dubbed as “Graphic Justice” (see Giddens 2016). At the same time, it has numerous connections to the themes discussed earlier. It involves the activities of an NGO working for migrants’ rights; it presents comics as a solution to overcome linguistic barriers; and it suggests that comics can consolidate the legal position of migrant workers.

## What this book is about

The comic “Miksi?” presented at the beginning of the chapter is a relatively simple creation or text: it consists of a template of four panels, a monotonous ink line in both drawings and letters, the repetition of the geometric (talking) head of a sole protagonist, and crude lettering. Compared to the many celebrated works by renowned artists also analysed in the chapters of this volume, “Miksi?” seems to

offer little material for the curious reader. Yet, what “Miksi?” shares with all other comics is its status as a part of a whole network of practices.

For the novice artists of “Miksi?” – Mohammed, Yasseen, and Salam – to create the comic, numerous conditions are fulfilled. The organisation and activists of World Comics Finland must plan, finance, and schedule the workshop together with other potential organisers. Workshop participants must be found. Materials such as pencils, marker pens, paper of different sizes, rubbers, and rulers must be available. A flipchart, computer, and projector are useful for showing educational materials. The activity must take place in a room; tables and chairs are needed for the participants’ convenience. Instructors must educate the participants in comics storytelling and drawing, and interpreters may be needed to facilitate the communication between them. Everyone needs to have the right mindset for the task, and it may need to be enhanced with relaxation practices, snacks, or informal discussions at the beginning of a workshop. The participants must summon the stamina to pay attention to the instructional parts of the workshop, sketch their ideas and storyboards in pencil, sketch the comic on a larger scale, ink the final product, and consider whether to sign the comic with their real names, either with a pen name or not at all. They also have to read and discuss the produced comics with instructors and other participants, and perhaps sign a document provided by the organiser connected to approval of the publication and distribution of the comic they have created. Working spaces need to be tidied up, and comics and working materials need to be collected. Afterwards, the “Illustrating Me” comics are scanned, posted online on a dedicated website and in various social media, and occasionally exhibited physically. Here the comics find new readers, all involved in their own networks, that provide for the comic’s further life.

For a seemingly simple comic such as “Miksi?” to be realised and for its potentials to be actualised during the process of creation and afterwards, in various forms of reception, convoluted conditions need to be met. If the comic is to provide its creators with the possibility of self-expression, the satisfaction of artistic production, or, for example, the relief of being able to voice their frustration and anger, and for the comic to finally reach readers, different human, material, economic, and textual resources must be mobilised. This is true of all other comics as well.

In comics studies focused on comics as texts and their close reading, the resources that attract the most attention are the affordances of the medium’s formal or narrative conventions, for example, sequentiality, ellipsis, the co-presence of multiple images, the multimodality of words and images, and hand-drawing. While the comics format has been praised many times as particularly suitable for different purposes, more sceptical tones have also started to appear. Comics as the “art of tensions” (Hatfield 2005, 32–67) of various kinds may be suitable for the negotiation of variable identities, for the questioning of stereotypes, for the depiction of migrant geographies, for the sensitive treatment of traumatic histories, and for bringing forth personalised stories instead of anonymising media imagery, but their effects are the result of much more complex relations than those that are visible as aesthetic or narrative uses of comics’ affordances. The same also goes for those

effects of comics that are deemed negative. Our modest proposal in this introduction and volume is that comics studies move towards paying more attention to the multiple entanglements that comics in general – and comics and migration in particular – are involved in.

While differing in their topics of interest, disciplinary orientations, and theoretical perspectives, all chapters in this volume highlight the importance of studying comics in their respective contexts and in relation to different practices. Whether focusing on comics as representational practices or paying particular attention to the various other practices that comics are used for, the chapters highlight that representations or comics texts are always entangled with broader social processes and actions. This is realised in very different ways in the different chapters; while we have applied a slightly programmatic tone in this introductory chapter, the volume is not the result of the application of a single, common approach, question, theoretical framework, or methodological tool. The orientation towards what comics do and what is done with them is discussed sensitively with regard to each case and to specific research objects and research interests. Taken together, the chapters point at various ways of seeing comics as practices and how they are used.

In the volume's articles, this means examining comics' medium-specific aesthetics and strategies of communication as well as tropes, conventions, and traditions that circulate across different media. It means that comics are interpreted within the cultural, social, and political environments of their production, publication, circulation, and consumption. This implies the identification of the different purposes that comics are used for in contexts of migration, taking into critical consideration the ideological, economic, and other factors that motivate them; it also calls for an analysis of the strategic and practical application of comics as well as reflection on the implications and outcomes of these applications. It might have been possible to organise the chapters according to the loose conceptual distinction between representation and other practices, but as we have repeatedly emphasised in this introductory chapter, making watertight distinctions between these is not possible or even preferable. These two dimensions are present in all parts and chapters of this book, even if they are given different emphases or approached from different angles.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, "Migration and the use of comics", showcases the variety of comics practices by focusing on different kinds of applied uses of comics in the context of migration. As the case studies of the chapters extend from language training for "foreign workers" to the production of antiracist education material and from migrant-led activism to the uses of comics as instruments of sharing information and providing juridical assistance to migrants in vulnerable positions, all contributors engage with questions of power and agency in the networks of comics production and consumption. The second part, "Configurations of nationalism and migration", focuses on nationalism in comics' representations of migration and their contexts. The chapters draw attention to how comics may, on the one hand, reinforce nationalist, nativist, and xenophobic discourses and take part in the production of anti-immigrant sentiments and politics, and, on the

other hand, reappropriate nationalist or anti-immigration symbols, narratives, and discourses to produce potentially more diverse or open meanings of nations and belonging. The final part, “Conventions and Revisions of Migration Narratives”, examines the conventions and norms that shape the narrative strategies and reading practices of comics (and other representations) about contemporary as well as historical displacement. Considering the ethical and political implications of prevalent patterns of narration, representation, and interpretation and reflecting upon alternatives to conventions that are possibly problematic or limited, the chapters foreground the role of graphic narration in making sense of migration.

To underline our interest in the practices surrounding comics and their uses, we have included two types of texts in this volume. Although most chapters represent academic perspectives on comics and take the form of a standard research article, three chapters contain practitioners’ views on their work in a more essayistic form. These are Chapters 6, 11, and 14 by Groglopo and Alvarez, Dimitrova, and Tervonen, respectively. These have strong footholds in academic discussions, yet they focus on their authors’ reflections on comics as a means of communication. As comics studies still has some way to go to embrace practice-oriented approaches combining perspectives on representations with an interest in the processes of production, distribution, and reception, such statements by practitioners on their activities and ideas provide a necessary complement to the predominant interest in comics texts themselves. In addition to widening the scope of research towards practice-oriented perspectives, the volume also takes part in the attempt to extend comics studies towards cultural and linguistic areas that are underrepresented in (English-language) comics scholarship, including case studies that focus on comics texts and practices in northern Europe – Sweden, Germany, and Finland – as well as Thailand and Mexico.

We do not imagine that this volume offers a final say on the entanglements of comics and migration. On the contrary, our wish is that its chapters inspire a continued multi-sited study of comics and migration in different geographic localities and in relation to a variety of practices.

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