

'Chosen' vs 'Forced' Representation: A Critical Analysis of Refugee Representation in Three Graphic Novels

ELLIE J. PASSMORE

University of North Carolina-Wilmington

Mentor: Dr. Jennifer Gully, Associate Chair of Department Affairs,
College of William and Mary

In recent years, with the rise of the 'refugee crisis,' there has been a simultaneous rise in refugee stories and novels. These take a variety of forms and many of them are written to prompt the general public to consider the conditions from which, and to which, these refugees are fleeing. However, many of these stories are written from an outside perspective and thus are only able to reflect on the 'crisis' and conditions from that point of view, barring them from being anything other than outside representation. *Threads* by Kate Evans is one such instance, focusing on visual representation and taking advantage of its flexibility as a graphic novel to depict things in a way a written story cannot. This graphic novel can be placed in contrast and in relation to two additional graphic novels regarding refugees: *Alphabet des Ankommens* by a collection of 10 authors and *Over Under Sideways Down* by Karrie Fransman. *Alphabet* is written by refugees and immigrants and thus presents insider perspectives on the so-called crisis, while *Over Under Sideways Down* is written by Fransman as dictated to her by a young refugee. The graphic novels weave self-reflective elements and reflection on representation and identity in the refugee crisis into their narratives, bringing forward the discourse of outside-versus self-representation. Part of this discourse is the difference between 'chosen' representation, or representation that refugees want

and willingly consent to, and 'forced' representation, which is the kind of representation that is done without asking or through coercion.

Even with the publication of Johnson's (2011) scholarly article about the overarching media trend of representing refugees as feminine masses rather than as male individual figures, there has been some difficulty locating academic or scholarly articles that pertain to the representation of refugees by refugees themselves versus by outsiders. In an essay titled "Public and private photographs of refugees: The problem of representation," Mannik (2012) discusses a pervasive trend in media that further marginalizes refugees by depicting them as dirty or a hazard to health, such as when aid workers and rescuers are shown wearing gloves and protective masks when helping refugees, and how that public image is often in direct contrast to the private images refugees have and take of themselves.

Mannik (2012) also explores an extension of Johnson's mass vs. individual concept by examining how photographs taken by refugees of refugees portray small groups of individuals in what Haldrup and Jonas (2003 as cited in Mannik 2012) termed the "family gaze," or the pose where a relatively put-together group stands next to one another and stares directly at the camera, thus using self-representation to break the stereotype of refugees as a conglomerate whole. By staring directly at the camera in small groups, the individuals within the photograph become impossible to ignore, which serves to return individuality to the people in the photo. Family gaze photographs also provide an opportunity for refugees to represent themselves the way they view themselves as opposed to how outside representation typically depicts them, as evinced by how the photos in Haldrup and Jonas' (2003) article show clean, relatively well-dressed people as opposed to mass media photographs that tend to depict refugees in dirty or worn-out clothing.

These earlier family gaze selfies mirror the refugee selfies of today. Chouliaraki (2017) delves deep into topics surrounding what defines a selfie, the different approaches to taking a selfie, and how selfies can be framed. Much like the photographs Mannik analyzed for her essay, Chouliaraki points out that refugee selfies often directly contradict the general public's ideas of what a refugee should look like and how they should act. She goes further and examines how celebrities use "solidarity selfies," which can alter the act of witnessing and turn a "focus on an internal controversy of "our" own popular culture [...] rather than the troubling absence of the migrant face across news platforms" (Chouliaraki 2017, pp. 78-94). While in the same range as selfie representation, solidarity selfies can instead remove the message and impact of refugee selfies and return it to the public or mass media instead of the people attempting to be heard.

Recent comics scholarship shows "comics as a tool for self-determined media production and a means of countering mass media tropes of suffering that deny both individual specificity and context" (Mickwitz, 2020, pp. 463). Mickwitz (2020) claims comics have the ability to offer refugees both self-representation and a counter to dehumanizing media and institutional representation. As compared to mass media, comics and graphic novels allow for greater emphasis on individual story and allow for highly personal narratives on suffering and social injustice by marginalized voices. Further research is needed in this area as scholarship in this field is still relatively new and there are few articles on the topic aside from Mickwitz's (2020).

Constraints on revealing identity due to European asylum law and the sometimes-limited access to mediums or avenues to represent oneself often block refugees who want to tell their stories in a more public fashion. These difficulties are not just related to creating the stories, but also to distributing them and having them heard. The larger trend of marginalized peoples lacking the ability to disseminate their voices can be traced back to the colonial era, when Britain in-

vaded 90% of the world's countries and colonized 24% of the world's land area; by 1914 a whopping 84% of the world had been affected by colonization at some point. The era and legacy of colonialism includes concerted efforts to silence marginalized communities. As the last European colony was decolonized in 1999, the world is still dealing with the legacy of colonialism and issues of silence and outside representation still play a large role in whether and how marginalized voices, including those of refugees, are being heard.

As mentioned above, there are different kinds of representation, not all of them equal. To start, there is 'chosen' and 'forced' representation. Chosen representation is representation that someone chooses willingly and without coercion. This can include things like selfies, portraits, interviews, etc. so long as the person in the subject role voluntarily agrees. Forced representation, on the other hand, is representation that occurs either without consent or with consent through coercion. Media images of refugees sometimes fall into this category, as shown below. Related to chosen and forced representation are 'inside' and 'outside' representation. Inside representation is representation that comes from *within* the community or group being represented and representation that comes from a source external to the community or group. The refugee selfies and family photos are examples of inside representations.

Outside representation can be further subdivided into what this paper will term 'primary outside representation,' or representation that comes from an outside source but *in conjunction with* a consenting member, or members, of the group being represented. The comics mentioned in this essay are examples of primary outside representation. The second kind of outside representation will be termed 'secondary outside representation' is representation that comes from an outside source without consultation from people within the group being represented, without permission from those people, and/or without offering the people being represented a choice in their rep-

resentation. Media images of refugees often fall within this category. Inside representation and primary outside representation are forms of chosen representation while secondary outside representation is a form of forced representation.

With *Threads*, Evans (2017) creates a juxtaposition of forced-verses chosen-representation of refugees, taking advantage of the contrasting use of photography and art over the course of her visits to Calais and Dunkirk. The novel follows its author as she journeys into the Calais refugee camp known as 'The Jungle'. As an aid worker, Evans decided to draw what she saw while there, including the heartfelt and the brutal. Despite being a white native Briton, and not having lived the 'refugee experience,' Evans' depiction of the refugees comes from the perspective of the refugees she talks to and can be considered primary outside representation. As an artist, Evans has leeway to change the names and faces of the people she writes about and illustrates, and in fact she does: "to protect some of the people described in this book their identities have been altered and some characteristics have been conflated. But everything you are about to read really happened" (Evans 2017, p. 6). In an interview after the book's publication, Evans expands on this point by saying "comics are particularly suited to telling the stories of people [...] who have a need for anonymity [...] yet still depict someone who is recognizably human" (K. Evans, personal communication, Nov 17, 2017).

It is partially for these reasons that graphic novels are becoming a more popular medium to depict refugee stories. The ability to depict real events and people yet keep those people anonymous is an important aspect of refugee representation that comics can provide given their format of illustration rather than photos or videos. While language is powerful, some things are better explained if people can see them. In comics and graphic novels, authors are able to rely on illustrations to depict these things instead of trying to accurately represent them with writing. Just as importantly, though perhaps not often

thought about, is the fact that graphic novels and comics are easier and quicker to read than novels, or even short stories, meaning the messages and stories can be disseminated to a wider audience than might otherwise be possible.

Early uses of the graphic novel as a form of representation and nonfiction storytelling include *Maus* and *Persepolis*. *Maus* (1980-1991), drawn and written by Art Spiegelman, depicts Spiegelman's father's experience as a Polish Jew during the Holocaust. *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, published in 2000, depicts Satrapi's childhood in Post-Revolution Iran. Since the success of these early nonfiction graphic novels, and their ability to give voice and representation to the marginalized, the genre has begun entering more and more into the sphere of activism, representation, and nonfiction storytelling.

Evans' novel is a more recent example of a nonfiction comic and is in itself is a form of representation. Specifically, the portraits of refugees she paints stand as a form of chosen representation. The refugees sat for her paintings and once completed, the paintings remained in their possession; they were not distributed. Chosen representations like these have very different connotations than forced representations. This is especially important to note considering European asylum and refugee laws, which stipulate that a refugee may only apply for status in the first safe country they step foot into, regardless of whether they want to stay there or if they have family elsewhere. This law acts as forced representation, in that refugees are tracked using their photographs. Their pictures are taken, and a file is created detailing which country they are in, preventing them from applying for asylum elsewhere in Europe. These photos of the refugees capture the conditions of the refugee from the shoulders up, and while most would not consider these types of images representation as they are often used for primarily federal purposes, they do represent an aspect of asylum seekers and refugees all the same.

In this vein, the “D-Day” chapter of *Threads* depicts riot police slapping a pregnant refugee mother in the face, then forcibly holding the mother’s and each child’s heads while their photos are taken so they may be tracked by authorities. On the surface alone, this scene is a brutal example of photography for the purposes of identification, but if one ventures beneath the surface, the relation between these identification photographs and another form of forced representation, mugshots, becomes clear.

The use of mugshots began in the mid- to late-1800s and contained the now well-known image of a person facing the camera and two profile views. These photographs were always labelled alpha-numerically, with the addition of the defendant holding a sign with a code and their personal information coming later. In the “D-Day” scene, the ‘photographs’ are each labeled “l’enregistrement des réfugiés / Grande-Synthe Dunkurque 20/02/16,” (Evans 2017, pp. 130-32) pinning the family to a particular location much like a mugshot places a defendant within the context of their particular crime. These similarities are a prime example of how, “in one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates” (Sontag 2011, p. 5).

Beyond the visual semblance of refugee registration photos and those of criminal registration photos there is also a psychological connection made by the viewer. Everyone can recognize a mugshot or a wanted poster; they are an integral aspect in humanity’s interest in the criminal. Mugshots function as both a bureaucratic and propagandistic tool, with one scholar on the subject directing attention to the role of mugshots in the criminal record, colonial narratives, and genocide (Lashmar 2013). By emphasizing how “each [concentration camp prisoner] was methodologically photographed a categorised [*sic*] criminal for being a member of a prescribed race” (Lashmar 2013, p. 20) and “the use of photography to create cultural constructs, which demonised [*sic*] or ‘othered’ people” (p. 15) ties into the modern-day use of forced identification photos of refugees. This view of photogra-

phy as criminalizing has been noted for several decades, with John Tagg's influential 1988 work suggesting the view that state photography leaves little space for agency or resistance (Tagg as cited in Baylis 2018).

By framing forced representation of refugees in the same manner as the representation of criminals, authorities project a clear message into the subconsciousness of the viewer: these refugees *are* criminals. They are dangerous. Aberrant. This trend of tying refugees to criminality has been growing over the past twenty years as the number of refugees has risen globally, despite it being a statistically false narrative.

A further issue arises with photography when, in the *Threads* chapter "I Predict A Riot," there is a photo opportunity disguised as goodwill. Evans states, "this was supposed to be a line of tractable, photogenic kiddies, smiling for the camera [...] Nobody has asked any child's consent to be photographed. They should not have been manipulated into a photo opportunity not of their making" (Evans 2011, p. 88). This simple statement raises the question of photographic consent when photographing or video-recording refugees for news articles or documentaries. As stated, European refugee law prevents refugees from applying for asylum in a country other than the first safe country they arrive in. Taking photos and videos that will then be distributed to be used in news articles, relief blogs, and documentaries turns the refugees' faces into public knowledge and public property, thus allowing any lawyer or politician to find the photos online and use them against an asylum seeker.

The questionable ethics of secondary outside representation can be summed up best by the quote, "to photograph people is to violate them [...] it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (Sontag 2011, p. 14). This possession is created and owned by the photographer or filmmaker, not the subject of the photograph,

which not only raises legal and ethical questions surrounding representation, but also a more basic question: if a refugee already has so few possessions, is it right for someone else to take 'possession' of their identity to use however they wish?

Contrastingly, Evans chooses to show that she too made images of the refugees, but not by using force or coercion, and not for anyone but the refugees themselves. On her second visit to The Jungle, Evans brought along art supplies and protective sleeves and offered to paint the portraits of some of the refugees. Some said no, others approached her without being asked. As opposed to the photographs in *Threads*, having a portrait made is a conscious choice on the part of the refugees and transfers from being a form of outside representation to self-representation, i.e., primary outside representation. This idea is furthered when Evans shows how she changed some aspects of the people she is painting if she or they desired: "You draw me! But you not draw this, yes? No, I won't draw the cold sore" and "The kid has one of those faces where none of his features fits together right [...] I draw him pretty" (Evans 2017, p. 105).

Art continues to be a theme throughout the novel and is used as a foil for the violence of photography and forced representation. Another aid worker, Sue, arrived at The Jungle around the same time as Evans, but instead of distributing supplies, she created an art space for the refugees. Much like the portraits, the refugees are the ones who choose whether or not to make art and what to make. Even if the refugees do not depict themselves or their situation, art is still a method of self-representation and self-expression that can be used to express autonomy in an otherwise controlled system and serve as a reminder of humanity. The positive reverberations of art and self- or chosen representation can be supported by Evans' expository caption, "the Good Chance Dome has been so many things, a place for singing, acting, watching, creating, but always, always it has been a place of welcome," (p. 89) and again when The Jungle is in the midst of

being demolished, “in the middle of the mayhem, Sue keeps the art space open. People wander in. Dazed. Desolate. [...] now more than ever, he needs to make a mark. To know he still exists” (p. 160-61).

Also, able to stand as a form of chosen representation is *Alphabet des Ankommens* (2017), a series of comics published the same year as *Threads*. The series came about as a result of a workshop in Hamburg in which artists and journalists from 10 different countries collaborated to detail the impacts of international migration. The resulting graphic novel does not solely depict real refugees, but rather an amalgamation of true stories and fictional ones, serving to inform outsiders of the trials and tribulations refugees and asylum seekers face. It largely depicts ‘after arrival’ stories, rather than stories of the journey, either the literal one across space or the metaphorical one through bureaucracy. Despite its differences from *Threads*, the two are similar in that they remain respectful in the manner of representation, without fetishizing, exoticizing, or sexualizing the stories or their protagonists.

Alphabet des Ankommens utilizes the varying stories and art styles of its authors and illustrators to show the thoughts, struggles, and adaptations of refugees and immigrants coming to Germany. In contrast to many refugee-centered stories, the collection of comics makes statements about casual items and confrontations that non-refugees also face, thus turning the trope of the ‘dirty and desperate’ refugee on its head and instead allowing the comics to act in a similar way to Mannik’s (2012) and Chouliaraki’s (2017) refugee selfies. Since each comic was written and illustrated by or in consultation with refugees and immigrants, the project acts as both inside and primary outside representation.

Both kinds of chosen representation are reflected not just in the stories’ content, but also in the illustrations themselves, which offer varying degrees of anonymity and identification. A gradient from most realistic to least realistic, or perhaps a better scale of ‘most iden-

tifiable' to 'least identifiable,' is present both across the comic series and within each comic. "Ein ausgekochter Plan," "Das passende Puzzelstück," and "Uncharted Waters" all offer fairly accurate portraits of their story's protagonist(s), potentially and willingly offering real faces to tie the stories to, while also allowing other characters to remain within the frame of a more artistic rendering. Additional artistic representations range from 'picture book-esque,' to stick figure faces, to the mere impression of a face. As with *Threads*, each illustrator and author has taken the liberty to alter faces and names to protect any real people and stories while at the same time humanizing the refugees whose stories are being told. Regardless of how realistic or abstract each comic is, the stories and individual styles break away from the representation of refugees as a homogenous mass and reinforce the idea that "ein jeder von ihnen hat eine andere Geschichte / every one of them has a different story" (Pithan, personal communication, 2018).

Another comic in the same vein, *Over Under Sideways Down* (2014), is again written by a native white Briton and tells the true story of a 15-year-old refugee, focusing on both the journey and the arrival. Unlike the other two comics, *Over Under Sideways Down* by Karrie Fransman was in the unique position to use the protagonist's real name, Ebrahim, as he had already been granted asylum by the British government and could thus be safely identified. Despite this, and as with the other stories, identification remains a key component to the story being told, with an expository caption stating that "as his ID vanished, so did proof of his identity [...] without this evidence, the task of proving his whole identity to the British authorities began" (Fransman 2014, pp. 11 & 19). The comic goes on to show several more examples of identification being important, subtly relating back to the idea of representation; an ID is a legal form of representation that says 'I am a citizen of this country, I have rights' and without it, a person lacks a claim to national and international representation.

Ebrahim's story emphasizes the different attempts and methods of identification and representation. His ID was stolen by the people who brought his group to England, and without the card the British authorities resorted to guesswork, interviews, and even a doctor's exam in an attempt to verify Ebrahim was telling the truth about his age, nationality, and journey. Like with the other two graphic novels examined here, bureaucracy and legal struggles create the backbone of *Over's* conflict. In this comic, it is that very bureaucracy that serves as representation while Ebrahim awaits asylum. The legal notes, doctor's exam, and refugee forms act as secondary outside representation for Ebrahim as he tries to prove his identity and remain in England. While the paperwork and testimonies that are produced via this process are representation, it is noted that this repeated reliving of trauma for bureaucratic purposes does not give Ebrahim a voice nor true representation. In her paper on the subject, Mickwitz suggests that this feature of *Over Under Sideways Down* acts as a form of 'critical witnessing' that allows Ebrahim to play a direct role in forming his narrative while also displaying the power dynamics present in representation (Mickwitz 2020).

While Fransman and Ebrahim worked together to verbally and visually represent his journey from Iran to Britain, Fransman herself is the one who wrote and illustrated Ebrahim's story. In an interview she revealed that she would have liked a longer deadline for it to enable Ebrahim draw the story himself and to give him even greater control over the representation. This idea of chosen representation in *Over Under Sideways Down* is furthered when, much like how Evans' portraits became prized possessions of the refugees she painted, Fransman said "[Ebrahim] asked for the page with his mother to be printed" (Fransman, personal correspondence, 2018) so he could keep it and have a visual connection with his mother, who had remained in Iran. Altogether, *Over Under Sideways Down* serves to juxtapose Ebrahim's self- and chosen representation with the bureaucratic and secondary

outside representation he faced during and after his journey.

The contrast between *Over Under Sideways Down* using real names, *Alphabet des Ankommens* using some real names, and *Threads* altering names and identities offers an interesting example of the tricky nature of ethically and authentically representing refugees. While all three comics focus on separate aspects of the asylum process, from leaving home to settling in the final destination, they each share the unique feature of being able to visually depict their protagonists as people 'just like the audience' without having to blur their faces or risk exposing them to Europe's strict asylum laws.

Each of the three comics provides an example of primary outside representation juxtaposed against the secondary outside representation generated by media, bureaucracy, and EU refugee policies, and how self- and chosen representation by refugees is often in direct contrast to the forced representation shown to wider audiences. This paper proposes using the framework of chosen representation and forced representation, as well as of primary and secondary outside representation, in order to better understand people's differing behavior towards representation as well as the impacts these different kinds can have. In *Threads* by Kate Evans, the interplay of forced and secondary outside representation versus chosen and primary outside representation is on display as the refugees resist having their photos taken but lineup for painted portraits. *Alphabet des Ankommens* is a series of comics created by refugees and immigrants that show 'after arrival' stories with varying degrees of artistic realism that allows for personality and individuality to be portrayed without putting refugees at risk and demonstrates the multivariate ways primary outside representation can be done. *Over Under Sideways Down* by Karrie Fransman follows Ebrahim as he tells his story of journeying to and receiving asylum in England and again returns to the idea of primary vs. secondary outside representation. On a deeper level, the three comics can be placed within the discourse of legal and ethical consid-

erations of refugee representation, with each of them showing how these representations can influence the general public's perception of refugees as well as refugees' attempts to gain asylum.

References

- Al Abidi, A., Al Ajeel, M., Frank, N., Goetz, M., Heusche, C., Jomar, F., Omer, A. M., Paim, A., Raabe, M., Sheikhi, E., Weber, S., & Wiesner, J. (2017). *Alphabet des Ankommens*. Deutscher Comicverein e.V. Impressum. .
- Baylis, G. S. (2018, May 30). "The photographic portrait: A means to surveillance and subversion." *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 16(1), pp. 1-23. .
- Bhattacharya, I. (2018, Sep. 19). "Comics for a cause: An interview with artist Karrie Fransman." *ArtsPositive*. .
- Blakemore, E. (2019, Feb. 19). "What is colonialism?" *National Geographic*. .
- Chouliaraki, L. (2017). "Symbolic bordering: The self-representation of migrants and refugees in digital news." *Popular Communication*, 15(2), pp. 78-94. .
- Davies, D. (2017, Nov. 17). "Comic activism: An interview with comics artist and activist Kate Evans." *The Comics Grid*. .
- Evans, K. (2017). *Threads*. London, Verso.
- Ferrante, J. (2008). "Social stratification." In *Sociology: A global perspective* (#7, pp. 198-231). Belmont: Thomas Wadsworth, 2008.
- Fransman, K. (2014). *Over under sideways down*. Red Cross, *Webapps*.
- Haldrup, M and Larsen, J. (2003, Apr 1). "The Family Gaze". *Tourist Studies*.
- Hong, T. (2018, July 1). "Refugee stories: These fiction and nonfiction graphic novels about refugee experiences put a moving human face to the monumental statistics." *Literature Resource Center*. .

- Johnson, H. (2011). "Click to donate: Visual images, constructing victims and imagining the female refugee." *Third World Quarterly*, 32(6), pp. 1015-1037
- Lashmar, P. (2013, Oct 18). "How to humiliate and shame: A reporter's guide to the power of the mugshot." *Social Semiotics* 24(1), pp. 56-87. .
- Mannik, L. (2012, Nov.). "Public and private photographs of refugees: The problem of representation." *Visual Studies*, 27(3), pp. 262-276. .
- Mickwitz, N. (2020). "Introduction: Discursive contexts, 'coice,' and empathy in graphic life narratives of migration and exile." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 35(2), pp. 459-465. .
- Nuwer, R. (2012, Nov. 5). "Brits have invaded nine out of ten countries." *Smithsonian, SmartNews*. .
- Pithan, L. (2018, May 1). "Vom Ankommen und Aufzeichnen." *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*. .
- Satrapi, M. (2004). *Persepolis: The story of a childhood, 1st ed.* New York: Pantheon Graphic Library.
- Sontag, S. (2011). "In Plato's Cave." *On Photography* (bind up edition). Farrar, Strous and Giroux, pp