



## On Reading as Political Practice: A Review of *Graphic Refuge: Visuality and Mobility in Refugee Comics*

Davies, D., & Rifkind, C. (2025). *Graphic Refuge: Visuality and Mobility in Refugee Comics*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press

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This review of the book *Graphic Refuge: Visuality and Mobility in Refugee Comics* (2025), co-authored by Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind, provides an overview of the key conceptual framing and interdisciplinary location of the project, and includes the themes and arguments of specific chapters and references to primary texts. The author suggests that this contribution both consolidates and conceptually extends current scholarship on refugee comics.

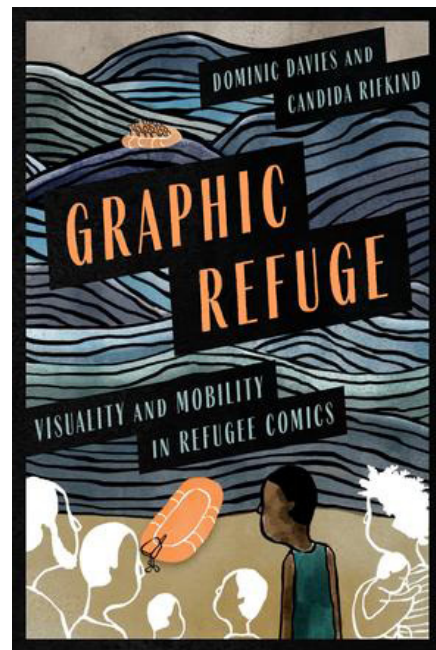
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Refugee comics have emerged as a sub-genre in its own right, with considerable numbers of comics telling refugee stories and addressing border crossings, bordering practices and the issues associated with forced and illegalised mobilities. As Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind duly acknowledge in the introduction to their co-authored book *Graphic Refuge: Visuality and Mobility in Refugee Comics* (2025; **Figure 1**), renowned precursors of this phenomenon include Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi. Contemporary refugee comics, a loose grouping that spans multiple formats, reader demographics and publishing context, have indeed generated considerable scholarly attention over the last decade.

*Graphic Refuge* is, nonetheless, the first book-length treatment explicitly dedicated to this subgenre and worthy of attention on account of its substantial critical interjections. In their co-authored introduction, Davies and Rifkind set up the subsequent chapters with what amounts to a positionality statement, introducing a set of vital ideas developed through this research to inform their readings and analyses. This includes an express intention to move beyond the Trauma Studies framing, one that still figured in their earlier collaboration as editors of the collected essays in *Documenting Trauma in Comics* (2020). Building instead on work by Critical Refugee Studies theorists (Yen Le Espiritu, Vinh Nguyen and others), the authors aim to transcend humanitarian registers. This involves shifting attention from the refugee as a figure of trauma, abject victimhood or perceived to require ‘re-humanisation’ and instead bringing into view the operational practices and agents (of visuality as well as mobility) and classifying logics that constitute lived experiences, those of asylum seekers, refugees and indeed citizens.

Davies and Rifkind introduce the notion of the ‘citizen-reader’ to shift from the figure/’problem’ of the refugee to instead bring into focus the dynamic relationship that connects refugee-subjects and readers, many (if not necessarily all) of whom are likely to enjoy the protections, security and rights to movement that accompany citizen status. But for the authors, this needs to be re-configured from a polar characterisation to a relational and interdependent relation. Another contention, is that in their ‘refusal of borders’, unsanctioned mobilities can be read as an assertion



**Figure 1:** Cover of *Graphic Refuge: Visuality and Mobility in Refugee Comics* (Davies and Rifkind 2025). © 2025 Wilfried Laurier University Press.

of agency and ‘a determination to enact their right to life for themselves’ (Davies and Rifkind 2025, 19). The idea of refugee refusal as an assertion of agency reappears in other contexts and manifestations in later chapters. At the very core of this project (as indicated by its title) is the assertion that, as they ‘contribute to the constitution of a new form of commonsense that is “polemical”, to a new landscape of the visible, the sayable and the doable’ (Rancière 2010, 149), comics can, and do, offer ‘refuge.’ They do so by inviting readers to critically re-consider not only habitual constructions of refugees but the interdependent relations between citizen and refugee, and by calling into question factors that produce forced (and simultaneously illegitimised) mobilities. However, and crucially, such meanings are not produced by the comics by themselves (or in isolation). These meanings are co-produced at the point of reading and, as the authors argue and then proceed to demonstrate, therefore also dependent on readers. The concept of the ‘citizen-reader’ thereby also provides a strategic device for moving beyond the critical impasse of either lauding or calling to account refugee comics for their perceived humanitarianism.

The book’s six chapters, of which Davies and Rifkind are each responsible for three, are presented as three themed parts, with Part 1 interrogating spatial conditions that often shape refugee narratives. Maritime crossings and camps have been prominent tropes in the discursive and visual regimes producing refugees. So, while a logical starting point, this might also seem a well-rehearsed debate. But both of these initial chapters push beyond familiar perspectives and positions.

In the opening chapter, Davies analyses various works that engage with Mediterranean crossings: Joe Sacco’s ‘The Unwanted’ (2012), early comics work by the NGO PositiveNegatives and the webcomics by Jeff Pourquoié and Taina Tervonen, including ‘Drowned Identities’ (2016), subsequently published in book form as *Á qui profite l’exile? Le Business des frontières fermées/Who profits from Exile? The Business of Closed Borders* (2023). Not unlike Pourquoié and Tervonen, Davies’ chapter adopts ‘an oceanic perspective’ to undercut the habitual views of maritime border crossings and instead bring into view the operations of territorial border control structures as economic, political and historically situated. This analysis is informed by Sadiya Hartman’s strategies for addressing archival absences as well as the activist practices of the organisation Forensic Architecture and, more specifically, its research sub-group Forensic Oceanography.

In the following chapter, titled ‘The Postdocumentary Turn: Refugee camp comics,’ Rifkind’s discussion of Don Brown’s *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* (2018) interrogates the tension between colonial and humanitarian incarceration regimes of contemporary refugee camps and contradictions that often extend into the narrative

and visual representation of such spaces. The theme of counterforensics (introduced by Davies in the previous chapter) reemerges and is expanded further in the discussion of Olivier Kugler's *Escaping Wars and Waves* (2018) that follows. Here, Rifkind also applies the term postdocumentary, used in recent photography theory to describe a shift towards participatory approaches and away from evidentiary image making.

Visual technologies provide the conceptual link in Part 2, between Davies' chapter on the mediatization of the 'War on Terror' pre-occupying Sarah Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts* (2016) and Rifkind's exploration of digital comics that offer interactive and haptic means of witnessing. Tim Ingold's (2010) work on drawing and Walter Benjamin (1935) on photography set up Davies' probing of factors (technological, but to no lesser extent situational) that shape mediation practices and their implications. These dynamics haunt Glidden's account of following a news crew through the Middle East in 2010 and reflections on her own project of witnessing and mediation. The chapter considers mechanisms brought into play by embedded witnessing and works (alongside Glidden) to make explicit how the refusal to cooperate becomes a logical enactment of agency in response to the extractive agendas of media producers and the presumed entitlement to information felt by distant media consumers.

In Chapter 4 Rifkind develops the concept of 'haptic visuality' with support from Games Studies and Animation Studies scholarship to explore the interactive comic *Exodus* (Rietman 2018) and the use of VR structures in the 2017 version of *Sea Prayer* (Hosseini et al 2017). Here, attentive analysis brings together technical aspects of production and experiential aspects of engagement to productive effect. In their presentation of fictional worlds, these examples reinforce the recognition that factual genres do not have the monopoly on socio-political issues and realities (also foreshadowing a later discussion of Hamid Sulaiman's 2017 *Freedom Hospital* by Davies). This is of course well-established in genres from Sci-Fi to Speculative Fiction, Afrofuturism and others.

The theme of technologies for seeing and sensing continues into Part 3: Ruins and Refuge, especially in the chapter in which comics about the war in Syria provide the focus for Davies' astute re-consideration of how proximity and distance play out at the intersection of visual technologies and remote witnessing. This productively unsettles habitual assumptions regarding proximity and distance, and the idea that distant seeing inherently works as a dehumanising mechanism, as Davies considers how 'comics have responded to drone warfare and a militarized visual culture in which [...] seeing has become synonymous with shooting and even killing' (Davies and Rifkind 2025, 22). This chapter deals with several different formats: a webcomic, a self-published

pamphlet, a graphic novel applying fictional devices and two illustrated memoirs, one of which is a collaboration.

Refugee subjectivity, as something extending far beyond legal designations and potential to span multiple generations, provides the central theme for the sixth and final chapter, written by Rifkind. Vietnamese Canadian Critical Refugee Studies scholar Vinh Nguyen has challenged the conception of ‘refugee’ as a transitory assignation and an anomaly that becomes ‘resolved’ by the granting of citizenship (2019). This argument not only resonates throughout, but becomes effectively demonstrated in, Rifkind’s treatment of Leila Abdelrazaq’s story of her father growing up in a refugee camp in *Baddawi* (2015), and two memoirs about family life shaped by forced relocation from Vietnam, to the US in Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do* (2017) and to Australia in Matt Huynh’s *Cabramatta* (2019). These geographically dispersed experiences bring into sharp focus long-term impacts of displacement and the persistent social marginalisation that commonly accompanies pressures to assimilate. But Nguyen’s conceptualisation of ‘refugeetude’ (2019), intended to capture a politicised subject position and dynamic capacity for agency, is no less evident in these comics and their production.

As shown by this overview, Rifkind and Davies adopt a broad and inclusive approach to comics, acknowledging that comics encompass a wide range of formats and media, whether in print or digital spaces, as physical gallery exhibits or interactive digital formats, and that the same text may exist in more than one form. This demands attention to how the texts operate and the experiences they offer, which beyond narrative considerations also involve visual and other sensory dimensions. And this is what the treatments here deliver, to produce a pluralistic view of what comics are and do. The authors are keenly attentive to textual properties relating to form as well as narrative, formats and materiality, and their signposting of contexts of publication and circulation help to locate the works discussed. However, this is a project focused on the means, intentions and framing of ideas and perspectives rather than one preoccupied with identifying distinctions and categories. The same attitude is also reflected in the ease and confidence with which the discussion of comics weaves in connections with not just theoretical considerations originating from other fields, but also examples of, for instance, painting, drawing and sculpture.

Comics obviously have characteristics that differ from other forms of narrative expression. But insistent emphasis on medium specificity can produce its own limitations. The many references to cultural expressions beyond comics as part of the treatments presented makes Davies and Rifkind’s account rich and informative. They also effectively position comics as participants in a broader repertoire of visual and

narrative cultural forms and responses, thereby implying a claim to equity of standing not based on singularity or exceptionalism. Its premise is instead that, while offering specific affordances in their various forms and contexts, comics are an integral part of a pluralistic discursive texture.

In relation to Comics Studies scholarship this contribution operates on several levels. As prolific and highly engaged scholars, both Davies and Rifkind have previously produced substantial bodies of work on this theme and connected issues. Their readiness to acknowledge and engage with existing work by others in the field is perhaps also a sign of the maturity of their practice. It most definitely characterises a collegiate generosity worth aspiring to. Some big-name theorists (Arendt and Agamben) that often feature in discussions about refugee comics are indeed present but, being well-rehearsed elsewhere, these theoretical contributions are not allowed to dominate. This work is instead firmly positioned as part of an interconnected field of research, engaging recent scholarly contributions from Comics Studies, such as (to name just a few) Gillian Whitlock (2020) on the ethics of reading, Rebecca Scherr (2020, 2021) from her longstanding engagement with Joe Sacco's comics journalism, Johannes Schmid's work on framing (2020) and Anna Vuorinne's (2023) attention to genre conventions in refugee comics. Relevant work from other fields is also engaged with throughout, adding to the production of dynamic and outward-looking scholarship.

Determination to make a sustained intervention in the discourse on refugee comics has clearly been the driver of the project, and substantive contextual and conceptual enquiry shape the readings in each chapter, allowing the authors to develop thoughtful and timely arguments highlighting the operations and normalised violence of bordering. Attention to historical and material contexts and factors, including persistent logics of extraction, securitisation, racialized and colonial violence, remains consistent throughout. In their engagement with the comics discussed, *Graphic Refuge* thus calls for critical reconsiderations in relation to visibility and mobility alike: *in* comics but also *through* comics. Davies' and Rifkind's collaborative process offers a compelling demonstration, not of academic expertise (although this is plainly produced as a result), but of reading as political practice. This, in and of itself, also feels like a significant contribution and worthwhile stepping-off point to further discussion.

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## Competing Interests

I am a member of the Advisory Editorial Board of the Crossing Lines book series at WLUP on a voluntary basis but was not involved in the publishing of this book. I have previously worked as a Visiting Lecturer on a course convened by DD. This employment ended in 2023 and I have a permanent position at another institution. No further competing interests to declare.

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