



## Reading for Refugeetude: 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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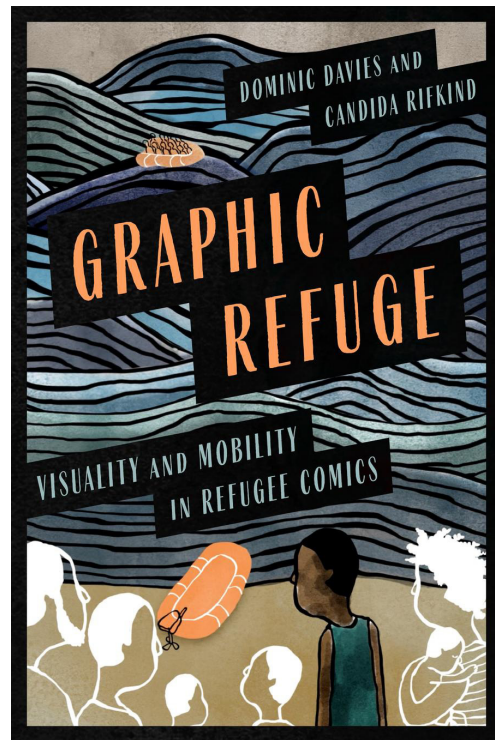
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This review of *Graphic Refuge: Visuality and Mobility in Refugee Comics*, co-written by Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind, with a preface by Vinh Nguyen (2025), places the book in the wider political and social context of recent policies against immigrants and refugees in the United States and Europe, and in the broader context of scholarly work on memory studies, visual studies, and critical refugee studies. The author provides an overview of the main themes, critical concepts, and primary sources approached by Davies and Rifkind, and argues that the book successfully engages with previous scholarship to foster new perspectives on refugeetude.

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*Graphic Refuge: Visuality and Mobility in Refugee Comics* by Dominic Davies and Candida Rifkind (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2025) does the essential and timely work of fostering new ways of seeing and reimagining a borderless world (Figure 1). Throughout the six chapters (written alternately) and in the *Introduction* and *Epilogue* (which are co-written), Davies and Rifkind are in conversation not only with each other, but also with scholars of critical refugee studies, comics studies, memory studies, spatial and visual studies, and other relevant fields. The common task is to ‘read for refugeetude’ (Davies and Rifkind 2025: 12), a process through which the authors envision a different map of the world, full of signposts and clues about what we, as academics, readers, and citizens, can actually *do*, what our books *do*, and how we might be able to contribute to changing some of the difficult situations we analyze.



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

In this sense, *Graphic Refuge* interpellates us as ‘citizen-viewers/readers,’ a term that works towards activating readers beyond the academic realm and drawing them into the political. In a world that is full of ‘We read/watched this so you don’t have to’ videos, Davies and Rifkind not only devote substantial time and critical attention to one of the most urgent matters in contemporary global history, but they clearly do not ‘do it so we don’t have to’; it is, in fact, quite the opposite. They attempt to engage us in these issues not as passive viewers, but as active citizens. Considering the rapid decline of worldwide support for refugees, migrants, and other vulnerable people during the first year of the second Trump administration, this is a timely and necessary interpellation.

When Davies and Rifkind started working on the book in the fall of 2023, it was perhaps difficult to anticipate the omnipresence of widely circulated images of masked ICE and DHS officers engaged in brutal operations against immigrants and those who support them, an effort some on the far right in Europe seek to emulate (Jochecová 2025). It was (and still is) difficult to ascertain the reverberations of the Trump administration putting an end to U.S.A.I.D. and probably causing, as Atul Gawande

recently wrote in *The New Yorker*, using a term by historian Richard Rhodes, a slowly unfolding series of ‘man-made deaths,’ whose scale is certainly more difficult to measure than if a war were taking place (Gawande 2025).

Davies and Rifkind do the important work of enabling the creation of connections among processes that may seem recent and/or deceptively circumscribed to a local stage unrelated to other worldwide phenomena. For instance, as a Romanian reader, the book also resonated quite strongly with me, for reasons that may not be as visible on the world stage as the anti-immigration Trump policies, but which certainly have a strong impact on communities and everyday life in Romania. Here, an ongoing migrant worker ‘slow catastrophe’ (Catlin 2022) has been unfolding since the early 2000s. The crisis is so momentous and pervasive that it has even started to generate new research and interest from sociologists, writers, and therapists. The latter have recently come up with the term ‘Italy syndrome’ to depict their Romanian (women) patients’ suffering in the wake of sometimes decade-old abuse at the hands of Italian employers against the background of other factors such as loss of home, family, and social status (Bubola and Lautaru 2025). The ramifications are considerable for the present and future of Romanian society and they are related to the precarious position of refugees in Europe and elsewhere.

*Graphic Refuge* builds several important arguments by focusing on comics and other graphic narratives from apparently unrelated cultural spaces and different time periods. The book argues throughout against the idea that refugees have linear, *Bildungsroman*-like lives and ‘quest narratives’ (Bernard 2019) that end with some sort of legal resolution that puts an end to their precarious status. Davies and Rifkind also oppose the idea that people who enjoy the benefits of full citizenship and relative safety are or should regard themselves as safely outside of or separate from refugeehood. On this matter, the authors engage with Michael Rothberg’s 2019 work on ‘implicated subjects’ to show how these comics engage citizen-viewers and provide a sort of ‘graphic refuge,’ a space created by ‘comics that bring into view the wider situation in which both citizen-viewers and refugee subjects find themselves’ (Rifkind 2025: 23).

The entire book maps out the interconnectedness between citizen-viewers and refugees. ‘There’s no real refuge for Palestinians—or for any of us’ (Nguyen 2025: xviii), Vinh Nguyen powerfully argues in the *Foreword*. The authors explore this by refocusing attention ‘from individuals to structures and from legal definitions to complex experiences’ (Davies and Rifkind, 2025: 5) and distancing their own work from the previous focus of comics scholars and creators on empathy and the humanization of the refugee. Instead, they consider the importance of reading acts of refusal by

refugees (for instance, the refusal of acknowledging the legitimacy of borders), but also by encouraging recognition by citizen-viewers not of the refugees' 'humanity,' but of 'their own situation as citizen-viewers' (Davies and Rifkind, 2025: 19). *Graphic Refuge* highlights the many ways in which the 'visual plenitude' of comics and other graphic stories, as Hillary Chute put it, bring out 'narrative plenitude' (Nguyen 2016) of refugee stories.

The first two chapters employ a counterforensics perspective to examine two different spaces of violence against refugees: the Mediterranean Sea and the refugee camp, which can both be connected to colonial practices. In Chapter 1, Davies explores Joe Sacco's 'The Unwanted' (2012), selections from the ongoing PositiveNegatives project, and Jeff Pourquié and Taina Tervonen's *À qui profite l'exil?* (2023). He demonstrates that such texts encourage us to look beyond what has often been depicted in the media and elsewhere as a 'refugee crisis' that only recently began and instead consider a *longue durée* view that embeds it in 'the much longer historical "crisis" of racial capitalism' (Davies, 2025: 29). By engaging with Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben's work, in Chapter 2 Rifkind also examines a long history of detention and discrimination through counterforensics by looking at connections between the refugee camp and the concentration camp in Kate Evans's *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (2017), Don Brown's *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* (2018), and Olivier Kugler's *Escaping Wars and Waves: Encounters with Syrian Refugees* (2018).

Part Two of the book examines visual technologies that facilitate the dehumanization of subjects through the creation of both hypervisibility and invisibility, a visual paradox whose existence can be traced back for centuries. In Chapter 3, Davies reads Sarah Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts* (2016), where he identifies what I thought to be one of the key points of the map of refugeeetude provided by *Graphic Refuge*, one where 'the time of the reading might also be understood as a reframed space of refugeeetude, or a place in which citizen-readers and refugee subjects can come together to contemplate the ways in which those violent phenomena are seen' (Davies, 2025: 126). *Graphic Refuge* contains many such points that show us how this engagement with one another's histories and situations can become possible. For instance, in Chapter 4, Rifkind engages with Michael Rothberg's work on implicated subjects (2019) and identifies 'the possibility of more radical acts of solidarity' (Rifkind, 2025: 154) in certain aesthetic choices from the 3D motion comic *Exodus* (Rietman et al. 2018) and the interactive animation *Sea Prayer* (Hosseini et al. 2017) that implicate citizen-viewers in the processes depicted in these texts.

Part Three explores the presence of ruins and other precarious spaces that expose the vulnerability of those who are displaced, forced or choose to flee their homes. Davies engages in an extension of his work from Chapter 3 by attempting to locate the

alternative visualities proposed by ‘Syria’s Climate Conflict’ (2014), a work of online graphic journalism by Audrey Quinn and Jackie Roche, *East of Aleppo: Bread, Bombs, and Video Clips* (2017), a graphic pamphlet by Brick, and two illustrated memoirs, Marwa al-Sabouni’s *The Battle for Home* (2017) and Marwan Hisham’s *Brothers of the Gun* (2018), with drawings by Molly Crabapple. Davies shows how such works can challenge ‘conventional associations of distance with dehumanization and proximity with humanization’ (186) by examining the magnitude of the violence against civilians suggested by concepts derived from ‘genocide,’ such as ‘urbicide’ (Coward 2009) and ‘domicide’ (Azzouz 2023), in contexts where aerial surveillance and targeted execution often overlap. Chapter 6 is a necessary return to the 1960s and 1970s in apparently unrelated cultural spaces such as Vietnam, Australia, the United States, and Lebanon, where Rifkind reads Leila Abdelrazaq’s *Baddawi* (2015), Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do* (2017), and Matt Huynh’s ‘Cabramatta’ (2019). This is a fitting last chapter because it returns to the premise that refugeehood needs to be regarded not as a recent, neatly circumscribed event, but as a lengthy, transcultural, inter-generational process.

*Graphic Refuge* also productively extends Michael Rothberg’s work from an earlier book, *Multidirectional Memory* (2009). There, Rothberg famously argues against competitive memory and the enduring global order of trauma to draw attention to connections among apparently discreet processes, such as the Holocaust, slavery, and colonization. However, *Multidirectional Memory* only explores the position of refugees briefly: in the *Epilogue*, Rothberg focuses on Gaza, mainly to support the main thesis of the book, namely that the ‘entanglement’ (Rothberg 2009: 313) of memories in the public space is crucial to a better understanding of how certain apparently recent political crises are, in fact, interconnected with others and have much longer histories.

Davies and Rifkind’s writing on comics about the crisis in Gaza in their own *Epilogue* also reinforces the importance of exploring more recent concepts such as domicile, which is essential for gaining a better understanding of the ramifications of the position of both refugees and citizen-viewers. By discussing the work of artists like Mazen Kerbaj, Molly Crabapple, Ellen O’Grady, and others, the *Epilogue* prompts readers to return to some of the chapters and better understand them as discoveries of the practice of refugeehood that anticipate these artists’ work on the recent violence against civilians in Gaza. In keeping with one of the main premises of the book, the *Epilogue* also emphatically and convincingly argues against the idea (sometimes circulated in the public space) that the Gaza conflict started in October 2023 and that it is a discreet event otherwise unrelated to a previous ongoing purposeful destruction of homes, settlements, and lives of Palestinians.

*Graphic Refuge* shows us that still being sheltered is a privilege; always being sheltered, an illusion. This discovery is also part of the work of the image, whose place in this process is something both the authors ask throughout the book and Vinh Nguyen considers in the *Foreword*. For Nguyen, the answer is that refugee comics facilitate an encounter that makes it difficult for the citizen-viewer to remain on the ‘un-visible sidelines’ (Nguyen 2025: xviii). He also sees promise in the ‘imagined community of readers and lookers, enmeshed in visual culture and warring images’ (Nguyen 2025: xix), who might understand that learning to look at the world differently is not an option, but ‘an ethical obligation’ (Nguyen 2025: xix). This is precisely the important work that *Graphic Refuge* does. Davies and Rifkind create a usable map of counterforensic practices in which citizen-viewers might eventually become purposefully engaged, and in which they understand themselves as already implicated.

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## Editorial Note

*Graphic Refuge* has also been reviewed in this journal in Mickwitz, N., (2026) "On Reading as Political Practice: A Review of *Graphic Refuge: Visuality and Mobility in Refugee Comics*", *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 16(1). doi: <https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.27614>.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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