

# Framing ‘Rightlessness’: Narrating Refugee Experiences in the Graphic Form Through a Reading of the Graphic Text *The Unwanted* by Don Brown

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## **Abstract**

Refugees lead a life outside the social, political, and legal space of citizenship. Often placed in opposition to citizens and termed asylum seekers, refugees frequently find themselves ‘stateless’. As the German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt observes, being stateless often leaves individuals in a precarious position in international law, equivalent to being ‘rightless’. Recently, a large number of artists, writers, and journalists have drawn attention to this issue, using fictionalised accounts of real-life experiences of the refugee crisis, violence, and genocide. This article looks at the graphic text *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees*, written and illustrated by Don Brown. This article will consider how the fictional narrative space of the graphic novel is used to represent disempowered refugees. By employing elements of visual language, the text seeks to reframe the dehumanised refugees who are stateless and rightless.

**Keywords:** Refugees, Citizenship, Dehumanize, Rightless, Stateless, Graphic Novels.

## **Introduction**

*The Unwanted: Stories of Syrian Refugees* (2018) written and illustrated by Don Brown provides an honest, harrowing depiction of the experiences faced by refugees. Written against the backdrop of the Syrian civil war and the global refugee crisis, this award-winning graphic text illustrates the journey of Syrian refugees from war-torn Syria to Europe and other neighbouring countries in hope of a better and more secure life. The Syrian civil war is an ongoing conflict which began in March 2011, with the civil uprising of pro-democratic Syrians against the dictatorial rule of President Bashar Al Assad. When the government began to violently suppress the movement, protests, unrest and violence erupted nationwide and the country descended into a

civil war. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), around 13.5 million people have been forcibly displaced since the civil war broke out in Syria in 2011.<sup>1</sup> Of these, around 6.8 million people have fled the country to neighbouring countries or Europe, and the remaining were displaced within Syria. Many refugees from Syria risked their lives by travelling across the Mediterranean Sea in rickety boats or other vessels in the hopes of finding safety. Many lost their lives on the journey and others ended up in overcrowded refugee camps living in appalling conditions, neither returning to their homeland nor acquiring a better place to live.

Literature on diaspora has profoundly shaped the discourses on migration. However, narrating the experiences of a refugee is a different and difficult task from the established narratives of diaspora. Refugee writings often do not fit into the traditional domains of migration, in which concepts such as alienation, hybrid culture, and rootlessness still occupy centre stage. The stories of the refugee crisis demand studies from a different perspective that emphasises to the human rights abuses that refugees face. Generally categorised under the fields of postcolonial literature and migration studies, or diaspora studies, refugee literature contributes to the evolving field of human rights literature.. The intervention of literature and art forms into refugee issues exposes what is sometimes deliberately kept hidden by the mainstream media. In recent years, a number of globally recognised writers have written about the global refugee crisis, such as Khalid Hosseini, Alan Gratz, Atia Abawi, Mohsin Hamid, Ismail Kadare, Abdul Razak Gurnah and Jeremy Erpenbeck. These have provided a platform for the refugee voices that are commonly deprived of subjectivity.

Recently, a growing number of writers, artists, and journalists have begun to employ the graphic narrative format to write about the refugee crisis. Though graphic novels are not a new genre in literature, they have only recently been seriously considered as valued works of art. With works like *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, *Palestine* by Joe Sacco, and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, graphic novels have evolved into a significant literary genre. These writers effectively used the graphic format to write about grave topics such the Holocaust, 9/11, the occupation of Palestine, and the Islamification of Iraq, and have inspired a large number of writers and illustrators to adopt this narrative genre. There are number

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<sup>1</sup> 'Syria emergency', *The UN Refugee Agency*. At: <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>. Accessed 22/12/2022.

fictional and non-fictional accounts the refugee crisis in the graphic novel format. Works such as *Illegal* by Eoin Colfer and Andrew Donkin, *Sea Prayer* by Khalid Hosseini, *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* by Kate Evans, *Baddawi* by Leila Abdelrazaq, and *Escaping Wars and Waves* by Olivier Kugler are some notable examples of refugee graphic narratives.

Don Brown, award-winning writer and illustrator, has authored a large number of fictional and nonfictional graphic texts for both adults and children. *The Great American Dust Bowl*, *Drowned City*, *America is Under Attack* and *Our Time on the River* are some of his other important works. Brown's *The Unwanted* cannot be precisely referred to as a traditional graphic novel, as it does not follow a protagonist or a set of characters. However, the precise term "graphic novel" has been in dispute since its first public usage by comic book reviewer Richard Kyle in 1964. While certain graphic literature scholars like Hillary Chute find the term a "misnomer", the term is commonly used today, even while referring to nonfictional texts that use the graphic form.<sup>2</sup> In *The Unwanted*, Brown takes a journalistic approach to creating an educational and informative account of the Syrian civil war and the global refugee crisis primarily for young adults and adult readers. This article will explore *The Unwanted* to understand how Brown uses the narrative space of graphic literature to represent the disempowered, rightless refugees, and their experiences.

### **Crafting the Human Rights Graphic Novel**

While considering any literary work in the context of human rights, there are a number of common questions that arise. What might a literary work and art do in the realm of human rights? Can a literary text put an end to human rights violations? Can literature manipulate truth and reality? If human rights abuses continue even after producing a considerable amount of good writing about it, shall we conclude that literature has failed? Judith Butler in *Frames of War: When Life is Grievable?* argues that these questions often miss the point of what literature is.

Literature never got anyone out of prison or reversed the course of a war. Yet it does provide the conditions for breaking the quotidian acceptance of war and for a more generalised horror and outrage that will support and impels calls for justice and an end to violence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven, 'Introduction: Graphic Narrative', *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2006), pp. 767–782.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 9-11.

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Similarly, Michael Galchinsky, an advocate of human rights literature, discusses human rights and art form:

Emotionally resonant human rights arts typically doesn't change laws or regimes; rather, it seeks to change the prevailing ethos, by depicting what human rights mean for the individuals who are deprived of them, who witness the abuse, who perpetrate it, who mourn the victims, who intervene, who provide aid or who transmit the stories. By relating such experiences human rights culture tries to shape a durable recollection for the wounded community.<sup>4</sup>

Human rights literature in general, and refugee literature in particular, provides the readers with a vision of the current world of human rights violations and abuses that has no sign of abating. A human rights art form aims to stimulate certain emotions in a reader's mind regarding the condition of victims of human rights abuses, and graphic texts are no exception to this. A majority of the privileged world is unaware of the violations refugees face every day. The horror and futility of their journey are often considered unimaginable. Writings by and about refugees, whether in graphic or in other literary forms, aim to construct empathetic solidarity between refugees and the host population. They introduce the host population to the world of refugees whom they often consider strange or Other. This judgement is not only in terms of nationality and ethnicity, but mostly also in terms of appearance, culture, and religion. In *The Unwanted*, Brown does not give a name or identity to the refugees. Most of the characters appear and disappear within a few panels. Individual stories are often left incomplete. This notably does not prevent the readers from realising and acknowledging the tragic situation of refugees. The readers find the migrants, whom they have kept away from their surroundings, in close proximity in the panel space. Their tortured bodies and desperate faces are themselves a call to action. This acknowledging and understanding in itself is the primary aim of a human rights literary (and visual) work.

As the twenty-first century progresses, the role of photography in the visual culture is changing rapidly, as consumers are more drawn to images than ever before. According to Jean Baudrillard, pictures of war and violence have become so common in the new "media hyperspace" and the internet that many users have become desensitised to such imagery.<sup>5</sup> In postmodern

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Galchinsky, *The Modes of Human Rights Literature: Towards a Culture without Borders* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, ed. Julia Witwer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 50-51.

culture 24-hour news networks, social media, and viral images play a critical role in the creation of truth and realities. This is the realm of the ‘hyperreal’, which according to Jean Baudrillard, can replace reality with its representations, significantly influencing thoughts and behaviors. Media and the internet have had a significant hand in cultivating a prevalent anti-immigrant sentiment among the mass audience when the refugee issues have been at their peak. The intrusion of graphic narratives into this visual culture is crucial, as it allows to document the suffering of refugees that goes unphotographed, thereby challenging popular notions regarding refugees.

The opening pages of *The Unwanted* depict a tranquil Syrian landscape where a young girl looks towards the reader, walking with a grin on her face and a bouquet of flowers in her hands. A graphic text always assumes a reader in the position of a witness. The panels of the text act similar to a window through which a reader peers into an unfamiliar world. The image of the girl with the flower signals a welcome to the reader, and also establishes the setting. Beginning with the image of a peaceful Syria, *The Unwanted* quickly shifts to the destruction, violence and human rights violations Syrians faced during the civil war. While the narration gives an academic, historical account of the civil war, the images portray the torture and massacre in a complex and imaginative way.

To study a graphic narrative, it is fundamental to realise that the style of illustration an artist employs in the text is a matter narrative choice, not just aesthetics. Art Spiegelman’s postmodernist technique of illustrating Germans as cats, Jews as mice, and Poles as pigs in *Maus* is among the most famous uses of the graphic medium in discussions of politics. Analysing how victims are depicted is vital when considering a human rights graphic text. In *The Unwanted*, a panel shows several human bodies scattered along with a few vehicles creating an illusion of bodies and vehicles floating in an empty space (Figure 1). In the panel, the human bodies are drawn as caricatures, neither recognisable as humans nor entirely unrecognisable. In another panel, the refugees moving out of Syria by foot are placed adjacent to a corpse trees; in the subsequent panels, these humans assume the shape of trees exposed to the elements (Figure 2). In contrast to voluntary migrants, the journey of a refugee is almost always unplanned. Many of them travel for days without access to food, water, or shelter, only to be arrested by border security forces or killed by militant groups. By comparing them to trees, Brown depicts the ways in which refugees are dehumanised by their displacement.

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Figure 1: Don Brown, *The Unwanted* (New York: Clarion Books, 2018), p. 12.



Figure 2: Brown, *The Unwanted*, p. 15.

### **The Politics of Dispossession**

Living outside the social, political and legal space of citizenship, refugees find themselves disempowered and dehumanised, often being denied the minimal right to humanitarian consideration. Hannah Arendt discusses the state of homelessness and powerlessness in which refugees find themselves in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Her insights on refugees during the mass displacement of people during and after The Second World War remain germane. She observes:

Civil wars which ushered in and spread over the twenty years of uneasy peace were not only bloodier and more cruel than all their predecessors; they were followed by migrations of groups who, unlike their happier predecessors in the religious wars, were welcomed nowhere and could be assimilated nowhere. Once they had left their

homeland, they remained homeless, once they had left their state they became stateless; once they had been deprived of their human rights they were rightless, the scum of the earth.<sup>6</sup>

According to Arendt, human rights can only be effectively upheld in a community where those rights will be fully recognised. Refugees are uprooted from their homes and community. They become stateless and rightless, denied both citizenship and the accompanying human rights. Stripped of their dignity and unwanted by any country, a refugee is reduced to an undefined sub-legal category. The horrors of the Holocaust and the current refugee crisis are indeed different and cannot be compared, yet Arendt's description of the stateless and rightless condition continues to be eerily pertinent to the plight of today's asylum seekers. The loss of status and rights Arendt describes define the experiences of a refugee even today. Human life is devalued by neither having the citizenship rights of one's own country, nor receiving the accorded rights of a migrant. Arendt's ideas were further developed by Giorgio Agamben, who introduced the concept of "bare life".<sup>7</sup> According to him, refugees are the ultimate biopolitical subjects whose lives are regulated by those with power, keeping them in a permanent "state of exception."<sup>8</sup> Thus, refugees are reduced to "bare life"; that is, humans with no political freedom and rights, reduced to their animal bodies. Their dignity and right to live are at stake, and they are excluded from being regarded as real human beings.

This inhuman condition of refugees is illustrated throughout Brown's work. The fictionalised space of the text acts as an alternative space that freely explores the condition of the statelessness of refugees. The text frames the rightlessness of refugees by illustrating them in the dehumanised form, as bodyless and faceless caricatures. Indeed, throughout *The Unwanted*, Brown depicts the danger faced by refugees in a particularly harrowing fashion. Refugee bodies are shown falling into the ocean from the drowning ships, floating in the seawater, walking behind a wired fence, and standing crammed in boats. The illustrations of these bodies are often stark, focusing on reality over aesthetics. The images of corpses with open eyes, blood stains, bleeding hands, and starved bodies are all accurate depictions

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<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968), p. 267.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Agamben, *Means Without End*, p. 16.

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the subhuman condition of refugees. These images convey the rightless condition of refugees in a way written words cannot.

Despite these details in illustration, the text unambiguously reframes refugees as human beings entitled to rights and dignity. The images enable a narrative visualisation of what the refugees undergo in their perilous voyage to seek safety in a strange land, especially the day-to-day experiences, which are often absent in depictions. For instance, one panel depicts a woman and her young children foraging for food in a park, with the subsequent panels showing the garbage they are forced to eat; half-bitten apples and bread slices pestered with rats and bugs. Further, Brown does not shy away from depicting the long-term impacts of statelessness and the harsh conditions faced by refugees who are forced into camps (Figures 3 and 4). These representations of refugee experiences challenge the dominant political discourses of refugees as invaders or terrorists.



Figure 3: Brown, *The Unwanted*, p. 17.



Figure 4: Brown, *The Unwanted*, p. 59.



The graphic novel is able to communicate emotion in a way that is often absent from real-life footage of refugees. Many of Brown's characters lack recognisable facial features like eyes, nose or mouth; however, when he delves into a specific, individual narrative, his characters are far more emotional. Figure 5 depicts teenage refugee who has been assaulted by hostile locals in his host country. In certain panels, Brown provides no narration, forcing the reader to engage with the emotions depicted and extrapolate the narrative. These weeping and traumatised faces depict the anguish, dread, helplessness, and wrath that refugees face daily.



Figure 5: Brown, *The Unwanted*, p. 59.

According to the UNHCR, half of the world's refugees are children. Recent statistics of the agency estimate that 35 million refugees are children below the age of 18, and an average of one million children are born into statelessness every year.<sup>9</sup> Child refugees are especially prone to trauma, as their development is halted by their inability to access basic resources. Most of them experience or witness violent acts and are at constant risk of abuse and exploitation. Brown dedicates several of his illustrations to the experiences of refugee children in his text. Several refugee children are shown working in dangerous or predatory conditions to help their families (Figure 6). Lacking security, separated from parents, stunted in physical growth, and with limited education, child refugees are among the most vulnerable people on earth. This places them in a precarious position, as

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<sup>9</sup> 'Children', *The UN Refugee Authority*. At: <https://www.unhcr.org/children.html>. Accessed 22/12/2022.

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individuals who face abuse as children are more likely than non-abused children to continue to be experience abuse throughout their lives. The established political and popular narratives of refugees as “illegal” or “parasites” often exclude the plight of children, as it is far more difficult to justify excluding a child from human rights.

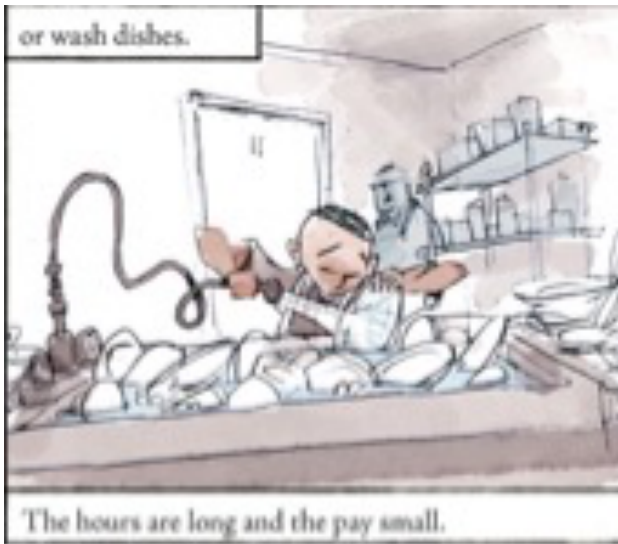


Figure 6: Brown, *The Unwanted*, p. 52.

### Navigating Prejudice

Xenophobia, which often manifests in calls for the tightening of national borders, is a frequent reaction to the idea of foreign refugees entering a country. Even if they are allowed in, many refugees face exclusion and prejudice from the communities in which they are relocated. Many nationals fear that refugees will bring with them violence and cultural difference, forever changing the community around them. Additionally, the political discourses portraying migrants as terrorists and religious fanatics combined with the widespread fear of Otherness often sets their audience against the very idea of refugees entering the country. Certain sketches by Brown visibly show this xenophobic attitude (Figure 7). On the one hand, the readers encounter the strangeness or Otherness associated with refugees. On the other, the panels of graphic narrative become a self-reflexive space for the readers from the host population. This forces the reader to evaluate their own

feelings and beliefs towards refugees.



Figure 7: Brown, *The Unwanted*, p. 45.

### Meaning Making Through Panels and Gutters

Despite the growing popularity and significance of graphic narratives, there are thus far few theoretical frameworks and critical tools for studying them. *Maus* is frequently cited as a benchmark text in the study of a graphic novel. Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* are seminal works in the study of graphic narratives in his work, though they have few peers. McCloud stresses on the significance of panels, gutters and closures in the study of a graphic narrative. He calls panels the "most important icon" and a "general indicator that time or space is divided."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Hillary Chute calls panels "boxes of time."<sup>11</sup> The image of the girl smiling and holding a flower on the first page of *The Unwanted* is illustrated again in the final part of the text, and is placed within a large panel which shows a totally destroyed Syria. Without any narration, the juxtaposition of these two panels signifies and compares state of Syria before and during the war. These are, of course, separated by various depictions of refugees fleeing their country and attempting to settle

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<sup>10</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> Chute and DeKoven, 'Introduction: Graphic Narrative', pp. 767–782.

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to new places, should they survive the journey. Hillary Chute observes, “Temporality can be traced in complex, often non-linear paths across the space of the page”<sup>12</sup>. Brown in his arrangement of panels continuously shifts between the war-ravaged Syria, refugee journeys, refugee camps, and attempts to settle in Europe in a non-linear fashion. A young man illustrated as sitting in a filthy apartment is immediately transferred to a boat of refugees in the Mediterranean ocean in the next panel. Thus, time and space are blurred between panels.

Discussions on the non-linear trajectory in a graphic narrative are incomplete without a discussion of what theorists refer to as gutters. Gutters are empty spaces between panels within a graphic narrative. Gutters effectively juxtapose past, present and future moments, as well as spaces. McCloud explains that a gutter “plays host” to “what is at the heart” of graphic texts, and that they are the only element of a graphic text that cannot be “duplicated in any other medium.”<sup>13</sup> Gutters allow the readers to co-construct the narratives along with the illustrators, adding their own interpretations and stories that transcend the panels and the text. Interpreting gutters lead to closure, which McCloud refers to as “a fill in the blank process of meaning-making between reader and a text.”<sup>14</sup> In *The Unwanted*, interpreting the gutters to decipher what is left unsaid is vital, as readers are forced to imagine the suffering experienced by refugees between panels.

Certain panels are arranged in a way to make the readers understand the individual and collective stories simultaneously. For instance, a small panel showing the worried faces of a group of refugees is placed within a large panel depicting refugees travelling together in a tightly packed boat. The image of a girl dreaming about going to school and receiving an education is placed adjacent to the panel which shows a group of children looking at a school ruined by a bomb assault. The panels thus continuously shift between the collective experiences and individual stories of the victims. Brown’s use of panels is of particular interest because apart from the indication of spatial and temporal divisions in the narration as discussed above, his panels and borders often imitate the very bodies of refugees. There are borders of panels disrupted by bullets, borders destroyed by fire, and bullets that penetrate borders and kill someone in the next panel (Figure 8).

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<sup>12</sup> Hillary Chute, ‘Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 123, no. 2 (2008), pp. 452–465.

<sup>13</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>14</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 67.

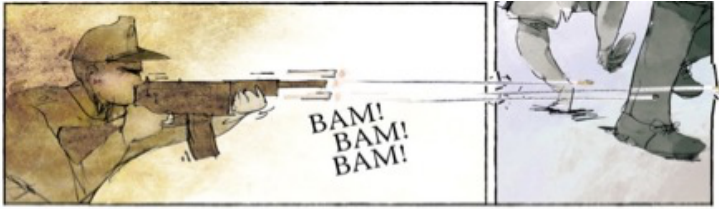


Figure 8: Brown, *The Unwanted*, p. 81.

Here the panels attain the dimension of an actual space, rather than a textual space. The panel and its borders in themselves become a part of the narrative, not just a format or device of graphic representation. As Chute observes, it is this “counterpoint of presence and absence”, the panels and gutters together, that move graphic texts forward in time through the pages.<sup>15</sup> The verbal narration, panels, illustrations, borders and even the empty spaces or gutters play vital roles in finding meaningful interpretations of a graphic narrative.

### Conclusion

Graphic novels have steadily grown in popularity over recent decades, though many still see them as a juvenile medium. Despite this, graphic novels have been used to great effect to illustrate a diverse range of political and ethical issues. With panels acting as windows, human rights graphic novels provide readers with the opportunity to observe lived experiences vastly different to their own. The face of a tortured stranger a reader witnesses is itself a call to action.

Refugees experience inconceivable loss, trauma, and physical and emotional violence. They find themselves highly vulnerable, their lives, dignity, and futures at stake. Deprived of basic human rights, they lack agency over their life, identity, surroundings, and even their bodies in their struggle for survival. Graphic texts can thus be identified as a particularly adept format through which an author may reconstruct the human rights of “rightless” refugees. By reducing refugees to painted caricatures, Brown presents how they are dehumanised and stripped of their individual identities. Frame by frame, *The Unwanted* navigates the real struggles of refugees and the trauma they undergo. The images Brown illustrates demand a

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<sup>15</sup> Chute, ‘Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative,’ p. 453.

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compassionate response from readers. Elements such as narration, panels, and gutters work together to bring the reader closer to the subjective experiences of a refugee. The graphic narratives thus provide refugees with a space in which their vulnerable state can be effectively interrogated. Ultimately, *The Unwanted* seeks to reclaim space for refugees, working to rehumanise them and empower them to reclaim their humanity from limbo.