

*Disaster Is My Muse:*  
The Legacy of Underground Comix  
in Contemporary Refugee Comics

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In the vast landscape of visual storytelling, comics have emerged as a powerful medium for narrating complex human experiences. From their origins in satirical cartoons to the development of superhero narratives, comics have continually evolved, adapting to, and reflecting the societal changes around them.

Arguably, one of the most significant transformations in the medium's history occurred during the countercultural underground comix movement –self-published or small press comic books that emerged in the United States during the late 1960s and 1970s (the x in 'comix' being meant to differentiate them from mainstream publications and emphasize the adult contents of many publications). Despite their transgressive stance, underground comix were not an escapist, nor a reactionary movement: on the contrary, as Art Spiegelman famously described his poetic, 'Disaster is my muse' (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 71). Spiegelman's words encapsulate the ethos of underground comix: a willingness to confront difficult, often traumatic, private subjects head-on, using the unique language of comics to express what might otherwise remain unsaid. Throughout the underground comix movement, artists pushed the boundaries of what comics could depict, tackling taboo subjects, experimenting with form, and infusing their work with deeply personal narratives. In doing so, comix became an integral part of the US counterculture of the time, producing a considerable amount of anti-status quo information (Duncan 270).

This article argues that the thematic boldness, focus on personal narratives, and experimental aesthetics pioneered by underground comix artists provided crucial stepping stones for comics to become a powerful tool for narrating migration experiences and advocating for refugee rights. It highlights how the legacy of underground comix can be traced through the emergence of alternative comics and graphic novels in the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in the recent proliferation of what scholars have termed 'refugee comics'<sup>1</sup>. In the aftermath of Spiegelman's groundbreaking graphic novel *Maus* (originally published on *Raw* magazine from 1980 to 1991, collected in six volumes by Pantheon Books between 1986 and 1991, then as a single volume by Pantheon since 1997), works such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (originally published in French in four volumes, between 2000 and 2003, by L'Association, then serialized in two volumes by Pantheon Books – 2003 and 2004 – before its final edition as a single volume in 2007 by Pantheon;) and Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2001, Fantagraphics; originally serialized by Fantagraphics between 1993 and 1995) demonstrate how the imprint of the Comix movement can be seen in more recent stories of displacement and search for belonging. While diverse in style and approach, these comics share with their underground predecessors a commitment to personal testimony, social critique, pushing the boundaries of comics storytelling, particularly in relation to non-fiction.

In addition to that, the rise of refugee comics taking place in the last decade has seen the emergence of a new phenomenon: the involvement of advocacy groups and non-profit organisations – mostly non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – in comics production. This development represents both a continuation of and departure from the underground tradition, raising new questions about representation and the ethics of storytelling that were less prominent in the underground era. By tracing this evolution, it is possible to better understand how comics have become an essential medium for engaging with one of the most pressing issues of our time: the so-called ‘refugee crisis’<sup>2</sup>. This article will explore the characteristics of underground comix that laid the groundwork for refugee comics, examine key works that bridge these two eras, and analyse how contemporary comics are used to amplify refugee voices and experiences.

The structure of this article mirrors the historical progression of comics from underground to mainstream to their current role in migration advocacy<sup>3</sup>. We begin by examining the underground comix movement, its key figures, and its lasting impact on the comics medium. We then trace the gradual influence of underground aesthetics and themes on mainstream comics, focusing on transitional works that brought mature, socially engaged storytelling to wider audiences. We move to the core of our analysis, which is centred on the rise of refugee comics, exploring how they build on underground comix’ legacy while addressing contemporary migration and displacement issues. Finally, we consider the new phenomenon of non-profit organisations’ involvement in comics production, examining its implications for the future of comics as a tool for advocacy. Through this exploration, we aim to illuminate not only the historical continuum between countercultural comics and contemporary works addressing global migration, but also the capacity comics have to foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, and contribute to nuanced conversations about displacement and belonging in the contemporary, increasingly complex world.

### **Underground Comix: Expanding the Limits of the Drawable**

The underground comix movement flourished within the larger anti-establishment counterculture phenomenon of the late 1960s (Cook 38), laying groundwork for the evolution of comics as a medium capable of addressing complex social issues. Underground comix emerged as a response to the restrictive Comics Code Authority, a ‘set of moral guidelines’ (Cook 35) that mainstream publishers self-imposed in 1954. The limitations required by the code responded to the moral panic that traversed comics consumption in the 1950s, largely due to the publication of the influential book *Seduction of the Innocent*, where psychiatrist Fredric Wertham correlated juvenile crime with comics reading (see Gilbert; Nyberg; Hajdu). The code had, in Gabilliet’s very strong assessment, arguably rendered comics a ‘largely “harmless”, artistically neutered medium’ (Gabilliet 2018: 155) – although it can be objected that not only the adhesion to the Code was voluntary, but that the main publishers easily found a way to circumvent the restrictions or leverage them as creative constraints.

Certainly, complying to the Code was one of the forces keeping the imaginary of mainstream comics tied to the realm of youth readings. In contrast, underground comix were targeted at an adult audience and offered subversive depictions of moral issues that ‘mainstream culture would have been shocked to see in a comic book’ (Duncan 270). Underground artists operated outside of the mainstream, often self-publishing their works. Aligning closely with the contemporary *Zeitgeist* – the movement shared many similitudes and interactions with the hippie counterculture, and would later be permeated by the punk aesthetics – underground comix were heavily influenced by existing traditions of ‘excessive’ comics for adults, from the erotic (e.g. Tijuana Bibles: Cook 34-35) to the satirical (the magazines *Help*

and *Mad*, both founded by Harvey Kurtzman, which would host several underground comix artists). These works deliberately flouted the Comics Code, venturing into territory deemed too controversial for mainstream publications, tackling subjects such as drug use, sexuality, and violence with a newfound freedom that allowed for a 'raw' approach to storytelling. Artists developed innovative styles and techniques that expanded the visual vocabulary of comics. This experimental approach provided future creators with a rich toolkit for representing complex experiences. Further, underground comix frequently served as a vehicle for social and political commentary, offering biting critiques of society and politics. This role of comics as a medium for social advocacy would be fully realised in the contemporary works of comics as 'advocacy tools' (Mickwitz 2020a: 286). Lastly, the underground movement was marked by a spirit of aesthetic experimentation.

This untamed experimentation took many diverse directions, especially in the peak years of the movement, between 1968 and 1975: the oversexualized and politically incorrect - often overtly misogynist and racist<sup>4</sup> - stories drawn by Robert Crumb in his *Zap Comix* (which also hosted contribution from S. Clay Wilson, Spain Rodriguez, and Gilbert Sheldon – the latter also known for his series *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*) were soon accompanied and countered by comix advocating for, or representing the instances, of several minorities. In particular, one can mention the experiences of *It Ain't Me Babe Comix* and the anthology series *Wimmen's Comix* and *Tits and Clits Comix*, showcasing artists like Trina Robbins, Barbara Mendes and Aline Kominsky-Crumb – and later on by works authored by BIPOC creators (notably Larry Fuller and Richard 'Grass' Green<sup>5</sup>) and those advocating for LGBT+ rights (particularly the *Gay Comix* series, edited by Howard Cruse).

In many respects, these engaged stances and unhinged realism are the ingredients that later shaped the genre of comics/graphic journalism, as we shall see shortly. At the same time, the increased focus on the discourse of the self of underground comix also resulted in the gradual establishment of the genre of autobiography, which would in turn lead to the consolidation of the graphic novel format<sup>6</sup> and to the birth and consolidation of publishers strictly tied to independent comics production, such as Fantagraphics, Drawn&Quarterly, First Second, Top Shelf and Conundrum. Artists began to pioneer deeply personal, confessional storytelling, laying bare their innermost thoughts and experiences, with a focus on individual stories that would provide a template for how comics could give voice to personal experiences. In this respect, while the primacy of comics autobiography is attributed to various authors (generally Crumb's 'The Confessions of R. Crumb', in *The People's Comics*, and Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, both published in 1972), the work of Harvey Pekar in the long autobiographical series *American Splendor* (1976-2008) - focused on slice-of-life incidents and mundane anecdotes – proved to be extremely significant in the consolidation of the genre.

1972 marks a turning point in the history of underground comix from yet another point of view: this year, two publications emerged that would exemplify the underground comix movement's impact and relevance to future refugee comics. The first of these is the Japanese publication of Keiji Nakazawa's *Ore Wa Mita* (translated in English as *I Saw It: The Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima*, 1982). The manga depicted the bombing of Hiroshima and its harrowing aftermath, drawing on Nakazawa's own experiences as an atomic bomb survivor. This 50-page work was revolutionary in its approach, using the comics medium to grapple with profound historical trauma. Its success paved the way for Nakazawa's extended series *Hadashi no Gen* (or *Barefoot Gen*, 1995), which was serialised in various magazines from 1973 to 1987, further cementing the potential of comics to address serious historical events. In the same year, back to the US, Art Spiegelman published his first three-page version of 'Maus' in the one-shot animal-themed anthology *Funny Aministrals* [sic], conceived by Robert Crumb, Justin Green

and Terry Zwigoff (Witek 103). Spiegelman was to become a crucial actor in the transition from underground comix to alternative comics, in reason of his own production and as co-editors of the magazines *Arcade: The Comics Revue* (with Bill Griffith) and *Raw* (with Françoise Mouly), which hosted most of the independent production of US authors since the mid-1970s. This early work introduced what would become Spiegelman's iconic representation of Jews as mice and Nazis as cats, a visual metaphor that would later revolutionise the way comics could approach historical narrative. Significantly, this short piece contained a crucial reference to the post-war settlement of Holocaust survivors in Rego Park, New York, making it one of the first comics to feature refugee protagonists (FIGURE 1). In other words, the three-page *Maus* was situated firmly within the underground comix tradition while simultaneously pointing towards the medium's future potential for exploring refugee and migrant experiences. These two works, emerging almost simultaneously from culturally distant worlds, set the stage for future explorations of migration narratives in comics form, proving the transnational potential of comics to engage with historical events, personal and collective trauma. Chute contends in this respect that the works here discussed evidence how comics can be used to 'materialise' history through drawings, text, and gutters, offering a way of 'seeing new' (Chute 1) whose constitutive incompleteness uniquely 'provokes the participation of readers in those interpretive spaces that are paradoxically full and empty' (Chute 17).

*Maus* was serialised from 1980 to 1991 in the pages of *Raw*, developing the original three-page into a longer and complex narrative that interweaved historical events with personal memoir which was 'groundbreaking in both content and form' (Cook 34). This serialised publication was later collected in six chapters, and later yet in two volumes - *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (1986) and *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (1991) - by Pantheon Books, which also collected the whole story in its *The Complete Maus* (1997). *Maus* achieved unprecedented mainstream recognition for a comic, including a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. However, the fact that this was an 'out-of-category' Special Award underscores the ongoing struggle for comics to be recognised as a legitimate form of literature capable of addressing themes that matter (Chute 2), and the very tension, inherent in the choice of the label 'graphic novel', that the form has since established toward literature as a crucial step in its own path of legitimacy and to decree the comic's alleged coming of age (see Pizzino; Hatfield; Williams). Moreover, *Maus* was seminal in blending individual and collective histories (Gabilliet 2018: 165), demonstrating how comics could handle complex narratives merging historical reconstruction and personal trauma (see Earle).

The social critique, political commentary, and experimental aesthetics pioneered by underground artists provided future comics creators with a rich toolkit for representing complex experiences. By breaking taboos, exploring personal narratives, and pushing the boundaries of the form, underground artists expanded the possibilities of what comics *could be* and what they *could do*. Their work laid the foundation for comics to become a powerful medium for documenting historical events, bearing witness to personal and collective trauma, and engaging with complex social issues. The direct, uncompromising approach of underground comix, their focus on personal testimony, and their willingness to engage with difficult social issues all find echoes in contemporary refugee comics' commitment to tell stories that might otherwise go unheard, amplifying voices that are often marginalised in mainstream discourse.

### **The In-Betweens: Graphic Journalism, Graphic Memoir, and Migration**

The innovations brought about by the underground comix movement can be traced through works serving as stepping stones towards more contemporary strands of comics production.

The mainstream acceptance of more mature, socially engaged comics was a process that unfolded over several decades. This in-between period saw the emergence of works that gradually contributed to bridging the gap between the countercultural ethos of the underground *milieu* and the broader audiences of mainstream publishing. Specifically, two world-wide renowned works gradually connected the underground comix experience to the more ‘ground level’ production. The first is Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*, which pushed the boundaries of what comics could achieve by establishing reportage in comics form as a specific configuration that would be popularised as ‘comics (or graphic) journalism’ (see Boemia; Mickwitz 2016; in ‘t Veld). By relying on the semi-indexicality of comics – on their capacity to refer to reality without claiming any full ‘loyalty’ in their representation, while often incorporating or remediating documental visual evidence (see Ahmed 2012; Pedri 2013; Weber and Rall 2017; Pedri 2024) - this genre immersively thrusts the reader into the scene portrayed (Rosenblatt and Lunsford 70), usually relying on the representation of the author as a signpost of the visual and narrative mediation on the events (from selection of the represented instances to their interpretation and emplotment: see White) and, at the same time, of the ethical stance towards authenticity in the author’s reconstruction (Weber and Rall).

In *Palestine*, Sacco engaged with accounts and experiences of refugees and people displaced because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, representing Palestinians in refugee camps and other places of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Sacco’s trademark style depicted ‘forgotten places and people of the world, those who don’t make it on to our television screens, or if they do, who are regularly portrayed as marginal, unimportant, perhaps even negligible were it not for their nuisance value which [...] seems impossible to get rid of.’ (Said, in Sacco 2024: 76). His approach challenged traditional notions of journalistic objectivity. His work emphasised the importance of subjectivity in reporting, with Sacco himself stating in his *A Manifesto, anyone?* that ‘facts [...] and subjectivity [...] are not mutually elusive. I, for one, embrace the implications of subjective reporting and prefer to highlight them’ (Sacco 2012a: xiii). The argument that ‘no truth can exist without subjectivity’ (Ahmed 188) insists on the relevance of the personal point of view in storytelling, and on the impossibility of escaping positionality. Sacco’s approach to reporting on marginalised communities and conflict zones demonstrated how comics can bear witness to overlooked realities. *Palestine* popularised the genre of comics journalism, providing a tool for ‘civic education through information, empathy, and mobilisation’ (Banita 51). Moreover, Sacco’s later work, *The Unwanted* (2012), directly addressed themes of migration, depicting African people attempting to reach Europe via the Mediterranean (FIGURE 2), this being one of the first comics to explicitly engage with contemporary migration issues.

This transition period also saw the rise of autobiographical comics dealing with cultural identity and displacement themes. While we have focused so far on the US context, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* stands as a landmark in this development, especially for the worldwide impact it has exerted on the production and theorising of migration experiences in comics since its publication. *Persepolis*’s blend of personal narrative with historical context assigns it belonging to the genre of graphic memoir (Pedri 2013) or ‘autographics’ (Whitlock 227). Satrapi’s work narrates her experiences growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution and her feelings of isolation as an Iranian immigrant living in Austria. The comics explain the circumstances that led first to the departure of young Satrapi’s friends and part of her family to the United States (FIGURE 3). The story follows her eventual journey to Austria, where she experiences feelings of guilt for having left Iran and intense loneliness as to her desire to forget her past. Satrapi drew on Spiegelman’s work to develop her own voice in comics, stressing the importance of female subjectivity in the narrative and aiming to create an ‘intentional social commentary’ (Marks 165). Interestingly, the same process of writing and drawing is itself a

form of active remembering, helping to express and make visible feelings that had been previously inaccessible, and making new meanings of experiences by revisiting and reinterpreting the past and ‘constructing knowledge through causality and reasoning’ (Rosellò 242).

*Persepolis* exemplifies how comics can effectively convey the complex emotions and experiences associated with cultural displacement and the search for identity. Satrapi’s work built on the tradition of autobiographical storytelling established by underground comix, but brought these approaches to a mainstream audience, also in reason of the different comics tradition and cultural context where she operated: the work, first published in French, owes much to David B.’s style and to the overall artistic training that Satrapi underwent at the Haute école des arts du Rhin in Strasbourg. *Persepolis* is thus a vivid example of how comics could be used to explore themes of migration, cultural clash, and the refugee experience in a way that is both deeply personal and broadly accessible. Satrapi’s autobiographical work skilfully blends memoir with historical context, conveying issues of displacement and cultural identity that would become central to many refugee comics. Its exploration of the personal and collective dimensions embedded within issues of cultural identity, displacement, and the impact of political upheaval on personal lives became a template for many later refugee comics.

Overall, as the underground comix movement gained momentum, its influence began to seep into the mainstream comics industry, sparking a gradual but profound transformation. No longer constrained by the restrictions of the Comics Code Authority, creators began to more consistently explore complex, adult-oriented subjects. Further, building on the tradition of social commentary and critique established by underground comix, mainstream comics publishers grew increasingly interested towards works that tackled pressing societal concerns. This engagement ranged from subtle allegories to direct comment, positioning comics as a powerful medium for social discourse and activism. In other words, the aesthetics and themes once considered subversive found their way into more conventional publications. This shift allowed for a more realistic portrayal of human experiences, paving the way for comics to gain further legitimacy as a medium for addressing social issues. Alongside this thematic evolution, the autobiographical approach pioneered by underground artists found a home in the graphic novel format and in mainstream publishers, which impressed a spin that moved their market from newsstands to libraries. This trend led in turn to a further flourishing of memoir and autobiographical comics, enriching the medium with diverse voices and perspectives.

Visually, the fusion of underground aesthetics with mainstream polish resulted in a new language that proved very effective in capturing complex emotions and experiences (see El Refaie). Moreover, the influence of the underground movement extended beyond content and aesthetics to the very structure of the comics industry: the DIY ethos of underground comix inspired a new generation of independent publishers and creators. Alternative distribution networks emerged, challenging the dominance of traditional sales and expanding the reach of non-mainstream comics, allowing for a greater diversity of voices and stories. Through these interconnected changes, the once-sharp divide between underground and mainstream began to dissolve, creating a richer, more diverse comics landscape addressing the full spectrum of human experiences – including, crucially, the complex narratives of displacement and migration that would come to define refugee comics.

### **Strangers in a Foreign Land: The Rise of Refugee Comics**

The works of the in-between period demonstrate how comics can effectively document historical events and bear witness to personal and collective trauma, report on marginalised communities and conflict zones, and explore themes of cultural identity, displacement, and

exile. Works like *Maus*, *Palestine*, and *Persepolis* bridge the gap between the countercultural ethos of underground comix and wider audiences, demonstrating how comics can handle complex historical and personal narratives. These capabilities proved essential for the development of refugee comics as a distinct genre that could amplify marginalised voices. This represents a significant development in the use of comics as a tool for social advocacy and personal expression. ‘Refugee comics’ can be broadly defined as comics that focus on the experiences of displaced persons, asylum seekers, and refugees. These works often blend elements of memoir, journalism, and historical documentation to tell stories of forced migration, cultural dislocation, and the search for belonging.

While the term ‘refugee comics’ is relatively new, the themes and concerns it encompasses have deep roots in the history of comics, particularly in the tradition of underground comix. The characteristics of refugee comics are diverse, reflecting the complexity of the experiences they depict. However, several key features tend to define the genre. Like many underground comix, refugee comics prioritise individual stories and subjective experiences, typically situating personal stories within broader historical and political frameworks, thus helping readers understand the complex factors that drive migration. Refugee comics make extensive use of the visual language of the medium to represent the physical and emotional experiences of displacement, often employing complex visual metaphors to convey feelings of loss, disorientation, and hope. Reflecting the transnational nature of migrant experiences, these comics frequently incorporate multiple languages and cultural references, offering multilingual and multicultural perspectives. Many refugee comics grapple with the traumatic experiences of forced migration while also highlighting the resilience and strength of people who migrate, providing a nuanced portrayal of their experiences. Furthermore, several aspects of the underground tradition find new expression in refugee comics. Just as underground comix defied the Comics Code Authority, refugee comics often challenge dominant narratives about migration, offering perspectives that may be censored or overlooked in mainstream media (Mangiavillano 2023). The tradition of sharp social critique established by underground comix and the deeply personal style pioneered by underground artists provide a framework for refugee comics to address complex issues surrounding migration and displacement. By establishing comics as a medium for mature themes, underground comix paved the way for refugee comics to address adult audiences with nuanced, complex stories.

Several titles have helped to define and popularise the genre of refugee comics, each contributing unique perspectives and storytelling techniques. Therefore, we will briefly touch here upon a key selection of those which enjoyed considerable appeal in terms of both critical and commercial success: Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* (2006); Riad Sattouf’s *The Arab of the Future* (2014-2016); Kate Evans’ *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (2017); and Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do* (2017).

Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* depicts the immigrant experience through surreal, evocative imagery in a wordless narrative. Tan’s work exemplifies how the visual language of comics can transcend linguistic barriers to convey the disorientation and wonder of cultural displacement. *The Arrival* offers a ‘meditative exploration of migration’ (Nabizadeh 366) and achieves a ‘nostalgic effect’ (Busi Rizzi 2021: 647) that stages the ambivalent feeling of longing towards a homeland that one had to abandon by relying on aesthetic features such as muted colours and sepia tones that evoke an antique album-like appearance. The drawings of *The Arrival* are inspired by real pictures of migrants on their arrival at Ellis Island (Nabizadeh); yet it tells a story of migration set within a surreal and fantastic universe ‘full of imaginary animals, retro-futuristic machineries, and an unintelligible language’ (Busi Rizzi 2021: 647),

which makes it a unicum in the current landscape of refugee comics. In the realm of realism, Riad Sattouf's autobiographical series *The Arab of the Future*, which enjoyed a significant success in France, chronicles the author's childhood in Libya, Syria, and France during the 1970s and 1980s. The series offers a nuanced portrayal of cultural differences and the complexities of identity for those caught between worlds, providing the readers with a deeply personal yet political insight into the authoritarian regimes of Muammar Gaddafi's Libya and Hafez al-Assad's Syria. Kate Evans' *Threads From the Refugee Crisis* (2017) demonstrates how the comics medium can be used for journalism, documenting the author's experiences volunteering in the Calais refugee camp and bearing witness to current events and humanitarian crises. Finally, Thi Bui's memoir *The Best We Could Do* (2017) traces her family's journey from Vietnam to the United States, exploring themes of intergenerational trauma, cultural adaptation, and the ongoing impact of displacement on family dynamics. These works showcase key examples of how refugee comics can address complex themes of displacement, identity, and cultural transition.

Refugee comics, while diverse in their specific subjects and approaches, often explore several recurring themes and motifs that reflect the complex experiences of displacement and migration. Many of these works focus on the physical journey of displacement, depicting harrowing sea crossings or border crossings that serve as powerful metaphors for the emotional and psychological transitions refugees undergo. The loss of home, both as a physical place and an abstract concept, is a central theme, with artists often using visual motifs of abandoned houses, fading photographs, or cherished objects to represent this sense of loss and nostalgia.

Comics provide unique tools for representing the experience of cultural disorientation, with artists employing surreal imagery, fragmented panel layouts, or visual representations of language barriers to convey the confusion and alienation that migrant people may experience in new environments. The question of identity – how it's shaped, challenged, and redefined through the experience of displacement – is a recurring theme, with many works exploring the tension between maintaining one's cultural heritage and adapting to new societies (FIGURE 4). Intergenerational experiences feature prominently in refugee comics, examining how displacement affects different generations within a family and exploring themes of intergenerational trauma, cultural transmission, and evolving notions of home. The Kafkaesque experience of navigating asylum systems and refugee camps is another common motif, with artists using the comics form to visualise the frustration and uncertainty of these bureaucratic processes (FIGURE 5). While not shying away from the traumatic aspects of refugee experiences, many comics also highlight themes of resilience, community support, and hope for the future. This balance of hardship and optimism provides a nuanced portrayal of the refugee experience, acknowledging both the challenges faced and the strength required to overcome them. Through these recurring themes and motifs, refugee comics offer a multifaceted exploration of displacement, identity, and the human capacity for adaptation and perseverance in extraordinary, challenging circumstances.

The rise of refugee comics represents a significant development in the evolution of the comics medium. Building on the legacy of underground comix and the maturation of graphic storytelling, these works offer meaningful depictions of experiences of migration. By combining the intimacy of personal narratives with the visual storytelling capabilities of comics, refugee comics provide a unique and vital perspective on the global refugee crisis, fostering empathy and understanding in ways that other media match differently. As the genre continues to evolve, it promises to play an increasingly important role in shaping public discourse around migration. The power of refugee comics lies not just in their ability to inform, but in their capacity to help readers see the world through different eyes, fostering a more



nanced and compassionate understanding of the complex realities of displacement and migration in the contemporary era.

### **Organisational Involvement: A New Development in Refugee Comics**

A new development has significantly contributed to the landscape of refugee comics in recent years: the active involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and advocacy groups in their production. This shift marks a departure from the traditionally individual-driven nature of comics creation, particularly when compared to the underground comix movement that laid the groundwork for socially engaged graphic narratives. In the realm of underground comix, creation was often a solitary or small-group endeavour, resulting in magazines collecting artists working independently to express their idiosyncratic visions and critiques of society, often diverging in style and ideology from other titles hosted by the same magazine. The movement's DIY ethos meant that comics were often self-published or produced through small, independent presses. This approach allowed for a high degree of artistic freedom and the ability to tackle controversial subjects without interference from mainstream publishers or societal gatekeepers.

In contrast, the production of refugee comics has increasingly become a collaborative effort involving NGOs, non-profit organisations, and advocacy groups. These organisations have recognised the power of comics as a medium for raising awareness, fostering empathy, and advocating for refugee rights. They bring resources, reach, and subject matter expertise that individual artists might lack, while also introducing new dynamics to the creative process. One prominent example of this organisational involvement is PositiveNegatives, a non-profit organisation that produces literary comics, animations, and podcasts about contemporary social and humanitarian issues. Their first comics project *A Perilous Journey* (2015) tells the stories of three men fleeing Syria to reach Scandinavia. Created in collaboration with Benjamin Dix – founder of PositiveNegatives – and the illustrator Lindsay Pollock, this comic exemplifies how organisations can bring together artists, researchers, and refugees to create powerful narratives that blend personal stories with broader socio-political contexts (FIGURE 6).

Another notable instance is the webcomic *Madaya Mom* (2016), a collaboration between ABC News and Marvel Comics. This project told the story of a Syrian mother living in the besieged town of Madaya, based on real-time communication with a woman in the city. By leveraging Marvel's storytelling expertise and ABC's journalistic resources, this project brought attention to the Syrian crisis in a unique and accessible format. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has also ventured into comic production with works like *Clouds Over Sidra* (2015), a virtual reality comics experience that allows viewers to follow a day in the life of a young Syrian girl in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan. This project demonstrates how organisations can combine comics with new technologies to create immersive experiences.

The involvement of organisations in producing refugee comics brings several benefits. Firstly, it provides a platform for migrant people's voices, as organisations often have direct access to refugee communities and can facilitate the sharing of 'authentic' stories. Secondly, organisational backing can provide the resources necessary for wider distribution and translation, helping these comics reach a global audience. Thirdly, the involvement of subject matter experts can ensure that the comics accurately represent complex legal, political, and humanitarian issues surrounding refugee experiences. However, this new model of comic production also presents challenges and potential drawbacks. One concern is the risk of sacrificing artistic freedom or individual vision for the sake of organisational messaging. While underground comix were often raw, unfiltered expressions of personal perspective, organisation-produced comics may need to adhere to certain guidelines or serve specific

advocacy goals. Another challenge is maintaining adherence to the testimonies of migration when multiple stakeholders are involved in the creative process. There is a delicate balance to be struck between amplifying refugee voices and potentially speaking for them. The question of authorship and creative insight also becomes more complex in organisation-produced comics. Unlike the clear authorial voice present in most underground comix, these new works often involve multiple contributors, including researchers, artists, and people whose stories are being told. Navigating these collaborative relationships while ensuring that refugee perspectives remain central to the narrative can be challenging.

Despite these challenges, organisations' involvement in producing refugee comics represents an important evolution in the medium's capacity to address social issues. It combines comics' storytelling potential with the reach and resources of established advocacy groups, creating new possibilities for impact and engagement. This development is part of a broader trend of comics being used as tools for education and advocacy across various fields. From public health initiatives using comics to communicate complex medical information, to human rights organisations leveraging graphic narratives to document abuses, comics are increasingly recognised as a powerful medium for conveying important messages to diverse audiences. As this trend continues, it will be crucial to balance organisational involvement's benefits with the need to maintain the authenticity, creativity, and individual voices that have long been hallmarks of socially engaged comics. The most engaging projects will likely be those that can harness the resources and expertise of organisations while still preserving the raw, personal quality that makes comics such a powerful medium for telling refugee stories.

The rise of organisation-produced refugee comics represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the medium. It opens new avenues for distribution and impact, while also raising important questions about authorship, authenticity, and the role of comics in advocacy. As this new model continues to evolve, it has the potential to significantly shape public understanding of migrant experiences and contribute to broader discussions about migration, human rights, and global responsibility.

## **Conclusion**

The journey from underground comix to refugee comics represents an evolution in the comics medium, one that reflects broader societal shifts and the growing recognition of comics as a powerful tool for social advocacy. This trajectory, spanning several decades, has seen comics transform from a countercultural form of expression to a medium capable of addressing some of the most pressing issues of our time.

The underground comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s laid crucial groundwork for this evolution. By challenging censorship, exploring deeply personal narratives, and pushing the boundaries of visual storytelling, underground artists expanded the possibilities of what comics could be and who they could reach. They established comics as a medium capable of engaging with mature themes and complex social issues, paving the way for future creators to tackle even more challenging subjects. As comics gained mainstream acceptance, creators began to harness the unique storytelling capabilities of the medium to address historical traumas and personal experiences of displacement. Key works like *Maus* and *Persepolis* demonstrated that comics could effectively convey the nuances of cultural identity, the impact of political upheaval on individual lives, and the complexities of memory and intergenerational trauma; while the consolidation of the genre of graphic journalism – which owes much to Joe Sacco, since his pioneering work *Palestine* – has tightened the link between nonfiction comics, reportage and pressing social issues originating from the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

This set the stage for the emergence of refugee comics as a distinct genre. Building on the legacy of underground comix, the legacy of autobiographical comics depicting experiences

of migration and the worldwide diffusion of comics journalism, refugee comics have developed their own characteristics and themes. They prioritise personal narratives while engaging with historical and political contexts and use innovative visual techniques to represent the physical and emotional experiences of displacement. As evident when considering the works discussed here, the current state of refugee comics is one of growing recognition. These works are increasingly acknowledged for their ability to foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, and contribute to public discourse on migration and displacement. The involvement of NGOs and advocacy groups in producing refugee comics marks a new phase in the development of the genre, bringing additional resources and reach to these important stories.

Looking to the future, the potential of refugee comics appears vast. As global displacement continues to be a pressing issue, these comics can play a crucial role in shaping public understanding and policy debates. The genre's ability to transcend language barriers through visual storytelling makes it particularly well-suited to addressing a global audience on this transnational issue. Furthermore, as digital technologies continue to evolve, new possibilities emerge for interactive and immersive storytelling that could further enhance the impact of refugee narratives.

The rise of refugee comics has broader implications for comics as a medium for social advocacy. It demonstrates the unique potential of comics to tackle issues in ways that are both accessible and profound. By combining visual and textual elements, comics can convey information, evoke emotions, and challenge preconceptions in ways that other media cannot. However, as refugee comics continue to evolve, important questions arise. How can these works maintain their authenticity and impact as they gain mainstream attention? How can they balance the need to inform and advocate with the artistic integrity that has been a hallmark of comics since the underground era? And how can they ensure that refugee voices remain central to the storytelling process, particularly as larger organisations become involved in production? In conclusion, the journey from underground comix to refugee comics reflects the remarkable adaptability and power of the comics medium. It shows how a form of expression born in counterculture can evolve to address some of the most significant issues of our time. As refugee comics continue to develop, they not only shed light on the experiences of displaced people but also push the boundaries of what comics can achieve as a medium for social advocacy. In doing so, they honour the rebellious spirit of their underground roots while rising to meet the urgent challenges of our globalised world.

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Images

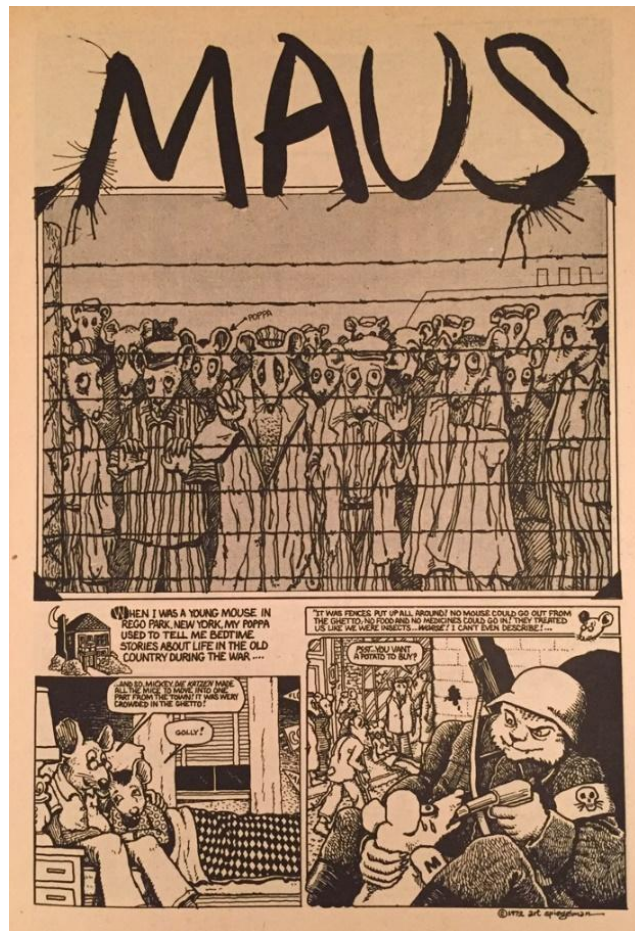


FIGURE 1. Excerpt from *Maus* (Spiegelman 1972)

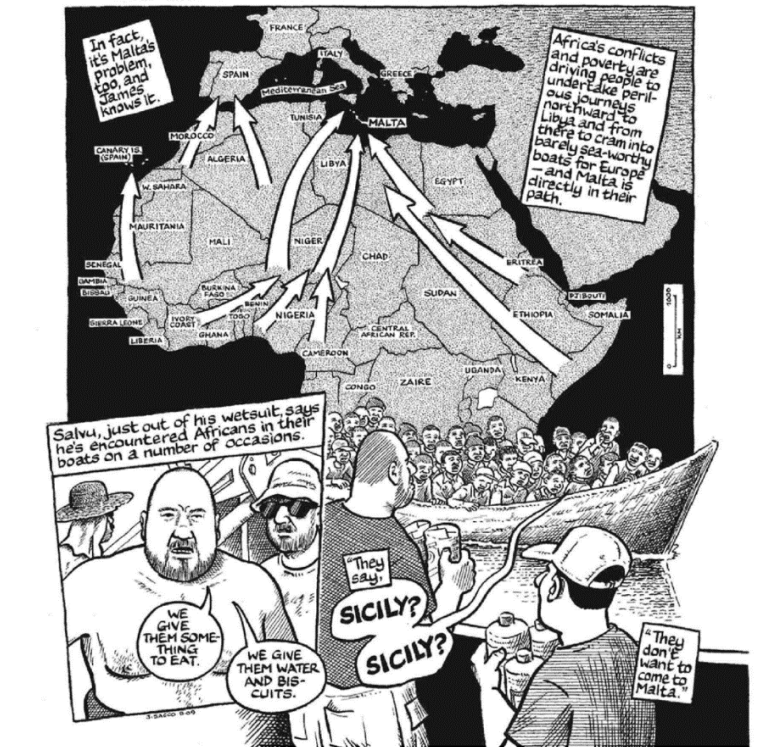


FIGURE 2. Excerpt from *The Unwanted* (Sacco 2012b: 110)



FIGURE 3. Excerpt from *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (Satrapi 2000: 64)



FIGURE 4. Excerpt from *The Best We Could Do* (Bui 2017: 36)

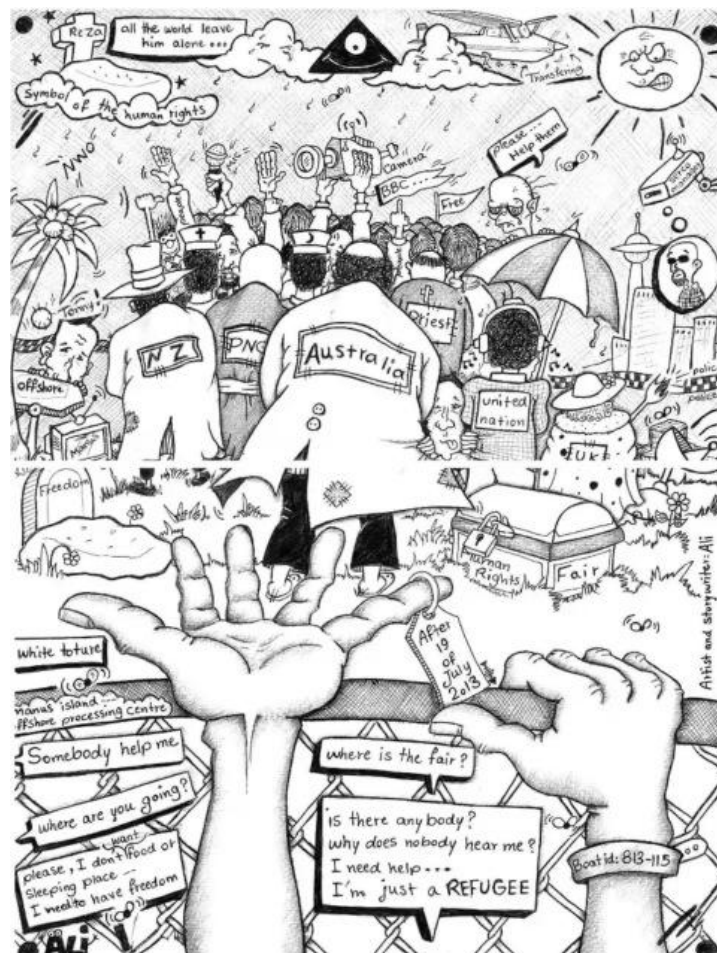


FIGURE 5. Eaten Fish on Manus Island detention centre (Eaten Fish 2016)



FIGURE 6. Excerpt from *Mohammad's story* (PositiveNegatives and Pollock 2015: 3)

<sup>1</sup> Since 2014, comics narrating migrant experiences started to be published, primarily in Australia, Europe, and the US. Overall, their narrative conveys firsthand experiences of refugees and migrants more generally (Rifkind 648). ‘Refugee comics’ is an umbrella term to refer to experiences of forced migration. This burgeoning production is taking the shape of an emerging genre (Mickwitz 2020a: 277- 293).

<sup>2</sup> The policy discourse on migration in Europe and the Global North more broadly is mostly based on a quantitative approach that has frequently framed the ‘crisis’ in terms of invasion, security issues and border control (Cantat et al.; Panebianco).

<sup>3</sup> This article draws on the following definition of advocacy that refers to visual media and, specifically, comics: ‘Advocacy suggests speaking on behalf of or in solidarity with someone who is not able to speak for themselves; advocacy, is motivated by an ethical response, and is, presumably, intended to support or effect social change. Historically, advocacy has incorporated a variety of mediated “speech”: prose and poetry; still images, photographic or otherwise; and audiovisual and moving-image forms. Yet there is a tendency to celebrate the affordances of comics for offering something new and unique to the mediation of such issues’ (Mickwitz 2020b: 459).

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, Cook rightfully observes that “the misogyny and racism in underground comics might not exist *in contrast* to the more open-minded attitudes of the hippie movement, but instead be reflective of (now forgotten or elided) tensions within the larger countercultural scene” (Cook 36). Nonetheless, many, amongst which several artists from the same underground *milieu*, voiced their disapproval of Crumb’s production: see Cook (36-38).

<sup>5</sup> See Wanzo 171-205 for an analysis of their comix and the relation they bear to Crumb’s in terms of racial and sexual representation.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of this transition, see Hatfield 108–27, ix; Gardner; El Refaie 11–48, 37; Kunka 21–52; Precup 55–108; Busi Rizzi 2024.

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