Perilous Journeys: Visualising the Racialised 'Refugee Crisis'

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Abstract

This article explores the benign and malignant power of the visual in the racialised framing of the ongoing 'European refugee crisis'. Bringing together literatures on racial discourses, visuality, storytelling and decoloniality for the first time, this paper breaks new ground in our understandings of the political possibilities that visual storytelling offers in shifting 'lines of sight' in an increasingly vitriolic anti-refugee climate. It does this by analysing prominent graphic narratives created by the non-profit organisation PositiveNegatives, animating the refugee experiences of Syrian men in Scandinavia. We consider the affective engagements that such progressive storytelling promotes and the decolonial potential invested in it, arguing that the modality and content of narratives of this genre offer important scope to provoke encounter and empathy. Contributing to geographies of race, migration, visuality and decoloniality, we suggest that these narratives allow new and gently radical ways of resisting the dehumanising impetus of mainstream media discourses.

This article is about the so called 'refugee crisis' in Europe and the visual communication of refugee subjectivities in a climate of rising anti-migrant and anti-refugee sentiment. It asks how, in such a hardening environment of securitisation and dangerously faithed, raced and gendered fear mongering and othering, can a sense of 'moral responsibility for mediated distant others' be nurtured and sustained (Dahlgren 2016: 382)? What tools are available to centre the experiences of refugees themselves within public imaginations, and what are the progressive and political possibilities of doing so? In particular, this article breaks new ground by showing how cultural representations of this 'crisis' can use visuality to decolonise imaginations and challenge the dehumanisation of much mainstream anti-refugee discourse.

We focus here on the specific examples of a series of graphic narratives created by PositiveNegatives, an organisation committed to disseminating interventions on global social issues through comics, animating the lives of three Syrian men and their experiences as refugees in Europe. Comic strips and graphic narratives are well established means of confronting and working through difficult and highly emotional topics, from Art Spiegelman's (1997) *Maus* to Joe Sacco's (2003) work on Palestine. They work as a 'medium of communicating complex ideas and positions' (Davis 2005: 266), offering 'lines of sight', provoking 'fundamental questions about the interpretation of visual images and about their power to really affect and invoke a moral and ethical responsiveness in the viewer regarding the suffering of others' (Whitlock 2006: 965). Yet, the power of their specific modalities still deserves more attention, as does the study of different types of comics and cartoons created in different political contexts (Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014; McCloud 1993).

Our discussion takes place against the background of wider discourses on refugees, asylum seekers and other migrant populations in Europe, which have been strongly framed by the term 'European refugee crisis'. This use of the word crisis requires deconstruction. While

much of the rhetoric about refugees arriving in Europe has focused on how European states and their citizens are responding, UNHCR (2017) figures for 2015 show that, if there is a crisis in the number of displaced people and refugees, then it has not been a European crisis but one borne disproportionately by countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Khiabany 2016: 756). The 'surge' of 1.3 million refugees applying for asylum in Europe in 2015 (Connor 2016), may have been significant in the European context, but was still only a fraction of the 65.3 million displaced people and 21.3 million refugees worldwide. This *European* crisis thus reads in many ways as another contemporary manifestation of the 'interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject' (Spivak 1988/2010: 238). A comparison between military spending by NATO members and funding received by UNHCR also brings this home: total defence spending by NATO members in 2016 was around $918 billion (NATO 2017), juxtaposed to $3.5 billion received by UNHCR by the end of September 2016 (UNHCR 2017). So if we are to talk of crisis, it is more useful to talk of the very visible crisis in European values and responsibilities which sees the EU's borders as one of the 'world's deadliest' (Jones 2016), where security is prized over everything else (Bauman 2016: 94). Indeed, we are now seeing more concerted academic scrutiny of the shifting character of different migration regimes and the increasing centrality of securitisation in how the movement, and settling, of people is both governed and discussed (Ehrkamp 2016: 3; Kallius et al 2016: 34; Rheindorf and Wodak 2018: 23; Waite 2017). More and more research too is highlighting the trauma of 'limbo' in the asylum settlement process (Darling 2014) and the bureaucratic cruelty of asylum regimes such as that in the UK (Refugee Council 2017) where the 'austerity agenda' has deadened compassion *and* practical support for those seeking asylum.

In this context, and at a time when dramatic, racist and highly gendered discourses of refugees and displaced people as 'other' have contributed to a pronounced rise in right-wing populism and extremism across Europe and other parts of the 'global North', we see an urgent need to take seriously the potential of representations that recalibrate, rather than augment, European crisis narratives. Our paper responds to this need by exploring the potentialities of graphic interventions such as those produced by PositiveNegatives as a form of narrative which offers an alternative framing of refugees and migration, less through the use of shocking images that risk overwhelming the viewer, and more through the subtle subversions of humanising depictions and the use of familiar and affective semiotic modalities. It is this, we argue, which generates a greater sense of connectivity and the scope for more heterogeneous political relationships (Rancière 2010).

The Power and Potential of the Visual

In 2004, Hirsch (2004: 1212), writing about the traumatic images of violence and torture that emerged from the invasion of Iraq, asked '[w]hat kind of visual-verbal literacy can respond to the needs of the present moment?'. This question seems more prescient than ever now, as domestic and international politics becomes increasingly conducted through popular visual language, not least via social media (Prøitz 2017; Weber 2008). Various disciplinary debates, however, have suggested that there has, until recently, been a reluctance in some subjects to give visuality the attention it deserves and to consider its transformative rather than hegemonising potential. Writing about International Relations, Weber (2008: 138) asserted that '… by failing to analyse popular visual language as integral

to global communication, disciplinary IR risks misunderstanding contemporary subjectivity, spatiality, and temporality'. Bleiker (2009: 19) argues that it is still a challenge to reclaim the political value of the aesthetic. Of particular relevance for the readings we present in this paper is his observation that 'aesthetic approaches embark on a direct political encounter, for they engage the gap that inevitably opens up between a form of representation and the object it seeks to represent' (ibid: 21). They add 'a different dimension to our understanding of the political and, by consequence, to the ethical discourses that are central to waging political debate' (ibid: 11). Crang (2010: 208-9), writing in Geography, has also pointed to an ambivalence surrounding visuality in qualitative geographical work, urging for more differentiated approaches to visual media that recognise its potential for 'connecting and making present' (Adams 2016). Geographers, however, evidently have been closely engaging with art and visual culture (cf. Cosgrove 2008; Rose 2001; Schlottmann and Miggelbrink 2015), even to the extent that they have perhaps created a 'neo-visual turn' (Tolia-Kelly 2012: 135). Within this field there is also a growing recognition that visuality and aesthetics have very specific and powerful potentials for generating affectivity and even evoking encounters (Campbell 2007; Prøitz 2017; Shapiro 2013; Sontag 2003), but there is still more work to do.

These debates are useful as we engage with current discourses surrounding refugees as this is a very visual 'crisis'. The story of refugees is being told in highly gendered and racialised images and through visual narratives ranging from racist cartoons carried in newspapers, to immigration dog whistle political campaigns, to journalists' photography of dead bodies – for example the high profile use of the image of Alan Kurdi (Prøitz 2017; Lenette and Miskovic 2016), an approach which generates enormous short term affectivity but seems unable to provoke sustained compassioned political action (Bleiker et al 2013) – through to the much more thoughtful, humanising graphic strips this article will consider. If 'seeing comes before words' (Berger 1972: 7) then the fundamental role of visuality, with its cognitive and emotional immediacy, in the shaping of this refugee crisis demands closer attention.

Our discussion progresses from here with the consideration of two interlinking threads – the significance of visuality in 'racing' bodies, and the progressive possibilities that visual storytelling can hold. We then present a close reading of three PositiveNegatives comic strips that draws on multimodal discursive and social-semiotic approaches (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014) to analyse how the framing, sequencing and use of specific graphic elements, in combination with verbal exclamations, open lines for interpretation that pluralise, humanise and ultimately decolonise the stories of refugees, potentially enabling encounter, empathy and connectivity.

Other Bodies, Race and Aesthetics

Focusing on the visual dimension of the refugee crisis forcibly reminds us that it is the raced, faithed, gendered, othered bodies of refugees which are being put at centre stage, being *seen*, in refugee discourse. One of the prevailing arcs of the narrative of the refugee crisis is the focus on the dramatic, frightening and overwhelming arrival of 'other' bodies onto European shores (Holmes and Castaneda 2016: 18), a fear communicated and stoked by invasive and tangible physical metaphors such as that signalled by Bauman's (2016)

'strangers at our door'. Ahmed's (2004: 72) exploration of the language of fear and how it distinguishes between those who are 'under threat' and those who threaten, remains as important as ever here. Thirteen years on, anti-refugee rhetoric continues to be used to depict nations as being under attack, mobilising 'home' as a defence against terror (Ahmed 2004: 74, 80). As a result, migration and security continue to blur in state and popular discourse, and bodies which look a certain way receive greater visual scrutiny and control (Amoore 2007: 11; Tolia-Kelly 2012: 139). And this threat is not only racialised, but explicitly gendered, and aged, too – young Middle-Eastern, Muslim men are read simultaneously as security and sexual threats to 'European society' (Rettberg and Gajjala 2016: 179), a 'triple pathology of race, gender and generation' (Hopkins 2006: 338; Isakjee 2016). As Turner (2017: 29) observes, it is such 'Islamophobic portrayals of Muslim Arab men as threatening, and as potential terrorists, rather than as victims and survivors of conflict in Syria', which are leading countries like Canada to refuse to settle lone, heterosexual Syrian men. While the treatment of refugee women in many of these tropes is hardly better, if even existent (Alhayek 2014), it is the men's bodies which are seen as especially menacing, a disturbing irony too given that Muslim women wearing visibly Islamic clothing are more likely to be the victims of Islamaphobic abuse 'in person' (Ganesh 2016: 32).

These intersectionally racialised slippages are simultaneously the product of historical, colonial legacies and a perpetuation of new eras of violently reconfigured orientalism. As Khiabany (2016: 756-7) notes, there is an unequivocal connection between contemporary refugees and displaced people and western imperialism. In his 2003 preface to *Orientalism*, Said (xvii) observed that '[E]ach of these phases and eras produces its own distorted knowledge of the other, each with its own reductive images, its own disputatious polemics'. The continued association of Muslim men, and the movement of people more generally, with terror, a now dominant 21st century distortion and integral to the framing of the refugee crisis, illustrates this only too well. But the violence of the othering being played out here reproduces much older medieval tropes as well as wider 'shared histories of colonialism and neo-colonialism' (Bhambra 2015). As Said (1978/2003: 59) reminds us, in the Middle Ages '[f]or Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma', constructed in terms of danger and fear. Davies et al (2017: 1268) use Mbembe's focus on necropolitics and the 'colonized body' in their work on the Calais refugee camp to assert a direct structural connection between the treatment of slaves on plantations with the contemporary apartheid of refugees. And within the context of a 'refugee crisis' partly located in Germany and Scandinavia, colonial and national histories of eugenics and of racialised social classification resonate loudly as well (cf. Kjellman 2013), highlighting that frameworks of racialised understandings of modernity endure (Quijano 2007).

As suggested, visual 'recognition' is particularly active in this othering, even powerful enough to create hostile 'misrecognitions', as Hopkins et al (2017) demonstrate in their research into the pervasive visual tropes of Islamaphobia and the phenomenon of being 'mistaken' for being Muslim. Once again, Ahmed (2000: 24) has explored this 'recognition of strangers'; '[t]his recognition operates as a *visual economy*: it involves ways of *seeing the difference* between familiar and strange others as they are (re)presented to the subject' (see also Saldana 2006: 10-11). A key point to remember here, though, is that this visual economy is anchored, created and disseminated as much through printed, drawn, transmitted and shared images as through the intimate bodily interactions which seem to

be receiving more attention (Price 2013). Representational geographies still wield unparalleled real world influence (Doboš 2017: 3). Any analysis of printed materials and images, moreover, needs to be mindful of the racialised power structures which shape them, and the racial and ethnic registers which are imbued in them. Images, art, cartoons, photographs, adverts (Campbell 2007; Pinder 2013; Donadey 2000; Ramamurthy 2003) – all of these communicate, and are presented, in othered, raced, languages and codes. As De Genova (2013: 1181) argues too, the visual, disseminated through media images, is too often deliberately harnessed to frame certain migrants in certain ways, for example through orchestrated 'Border Spectacles' which illuminate only the illegal positioning of migrants, while rendering their humanity invisible. It is Said (1978/2003: 52), however, who reminds us of the progressive possibilities of the visual. In his discussion of the Orientalist 'archive', he notes that the text-heavy nature of the Orientalist encounter rendered it something almost *unvisual*: 'Even the rapport between an Orientalist and the Orient was textual, so much so that it is reported of some of the early 19th century German Orientalists that their first view of an eight-armed Indian statue cured them completely of their Orientalist taste'. This highlights the power implicated in *not seeing*, in refusing to see, as with not hearing, but importantly also points to the potential of the visual to challenge, disrupt and recast even the most firmly embedded imaginations.

These ideas need to be central to the study of graphic narratives of refugee experiences. Race cannot be omitted, or unstated, in drawings; a conscious decision has to be made about how people are visually depicted. While this carries obvious risks in the potential upholding of damaging racial tropes, we argue here that art, aesthetics and visual texts can also help to create new and visible decolonial archives, acknowledging these experiences and narratives as legitimate sites of geo-political knowledge (Bhambra 2015: 118, 120). This links to the question of how to 'tell' the 'stories' of the people who find themselves in the middle of humanitarian crisis, to which we now turn.

Graphic Storytelling and Refugee Subjectivities

There has been a renewed interest in, and appreciation of, storytelling within Geography in the last few years (Cameron 2012: 574). Within refugee studies, Ehrkamp (2016: 6-7) charts a deepening focus on empathy and refugee subjectivities which is allowing scholars to highlight agency and individuality even in the most traumatic circumstances (Eastmond 2007: 253). A groundswell has been building which seeks to see beyond representations of 'nameless' 'numbers and things' and to greater recognition of refugees as people with differentiated histories and biographies (Khiabany 2016: 757-8). This leads us to the pressing discussions of the crisis of compassion towards refugees, and how to sustain a politics of care which endures long enough to initiate meaningful change, beyond the immediate impact of shocking images and events (Bauman 2016: 2; Dahlgren 2016: 382; Prøitz 2017). Arendt's (1963: 74-6) discussion of compassion – 'the capacity for suffering with others' (76) – resonates here. She argues that, as storytellers instinctively know, compassion works best at the register of the particular and not the general – for people to feel compassion there has to be a personalised sense of co-suffering, and an abolition of distance between those suffering and those not (ibid: 80-81; also see Boltanski 1999; Doboš 2017; Sontag 2003: 90). Similarly, Riechman (2009) argues that the potential to imagine violence suffered by others is lost if the experience becomes too vague and abstract. Such cognitive, emotional distance

has been explored in studies of Holocaust testimony; Langer (1991) especially warns of the fundamental impossibility of sharing the unshareable, and the futility which is felt in trying to communicate something, especially in textual form (Leak and Paizis 2000), that an audience can never understand (Edkins 2003).

Visual storytelling becomes especially important here in its attempt to bridge 'witnessing' and imagination. With comics and graphic narratives the imaginative 'burden' is partial – visual engagement and a direct witnessing of the situation through the perspective of the protagonists is established almost immediately through the images. As Dittmer (2010: 230) argues too, narrative strips have to be read spatially, and therefore 'comic book readers actively produce narrative' as gaps between frames have to be filled in. The consumption of the story is not passive, the viewer is not simply a spectator (Doboš 2017); an interaction, an element of reciprocity, is created. It is this scope for an imaginative, almost reciprocal, relationship which links so well with literatures on encounter and ensuing, although not assured, political potentialities (Ranciére 2010; Wilson 2016). It is also precisely the richness of the aesthetic nature of the storytelling, along with this imaginative direction, which offers 'possibilities to express emotional insights in ways that cannot easily be achieved through conventional accounts of events' (Ahmed 2004: 62). Kukkonen (2015: 54-5), for example, uses cognitive science to consider the 'body schema' embedded within graphic strips, discussing the possibility of the creation of an 'embodied simulation' which harbours 'interaction potentials' with the images. On top of this, in graphic narratives viewers are drawn in through the use of very specific modalities such as carefully drawn facial expressions, as well as a direct line into the inner lives and thoughts of the narrators (Feng and Halloran 2012; Kukkonen 2015: 58).

The affective dynamic of this kind of storytelling is clear, but this in itself is not sufficient for the responsible collection, creation and dissemination of refugee narratives. To draw on Spivak (1988/2010: 266; 1999/2010: 64), it is essential to 'watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern' and 'acknowledge our complicity in the muting' of any particular positions or voices. Storytellers must be alert to the danger of re-inscribing the 'colonization of the imagination of the dominated' (Quijan 2007: 169) when they offer to re-tell someone else's story. The progressive possibilities of storytelling, however, are manifold, and make this a politically significant tool (Price 2010: 158). The refugee storytelling being created in contemporary Europe carries enormous responsibilities surrounding power asymmetries, trauma and vulnerability, *and* highly gendered, racial scripts. There tends to be a perennial structural and emotional exclusivity about who is incorporated into certain compassionate and imaginative frameworks (Arendt 1963: 66-7; Ahmed 2004: 41). If some of these restricted parameters and lines of sight can be shifted, or even just widened, through new affective visual registers, then that is important work indeed.

Retelling Perilous Refugee Journeys through Graphic Narratives

With these possibilities and caveats in mind, the article now turns to the case-study of the PositiveNegatives graphic narratives 'A Perilous Journey', a trilogy of three Syrian men, and their experiences as refugees seeking asylum in Scandinavia in July 2015, presenting a discussion of how these narratives actively nurture an empathetic, compassionate and

imaginative engagement from the viewer/reader, and how they depict and challenge the othered position of Syrian men, as refugees, in Europe.

The three comic strips were produced by a collective of artists and researchers who are part of "PositiveNegatives", an organisation established in 2012 to 'produce literary comics, animations and podcasts about contemporary social and human rights issues' (http://positivenegatives.org/about/) – often working with, and funded by, a range of charities and other organisations. The collective 'combine[s] ethnographic research with illustration and photography, adapting personal testimonies into art, education and advocacy materials'. PositiveNegatives is explicitly activist and progressive. Much of its efforts are geared towards education, engaging young people especially in conversations about important social issues, and it has a large reach, currently working in over 600 schools across 27 countries (http://positivenegatives.org/about/). The driving goal is to use 'visual tools' to 'increase impact, and build empathy and understanding around various important global topics with diverse international audiences' (http://positivenegatives.org/about/).

The website carries graphic first person narratives illustrating a range of different experiences – migrant workers, human trafficking, being intersex – and there are clear statements about the general methodology utilised; interviews are undertaken with people in the midst of the issues or situations being explored, along with other visual ethnography work such as photography, and graphic narratives are then produced by illustrators based on some of these testimonies and the wider visual research (http://positivenegatives.org/about/methodology/). Inescapably the end results are mediated narratives, compiled by different actors and contributors, but the responsibility of this is taken seriously and the relationships between organisation, researchers, illustrators, participants, and ultimately consumers, is openly discussed.

The 'A Perilous Journey' trilogy is not the only work by PositiveNegatives relevant to the 'European refugee crisis' – there are also two narratives from Dana and Nadia who arrived in Serbia after fleeing Iraq and Syria – but for the sake of space here, and because 'A Perilous Journey' has been presented as a coherent 'package' of narratives, funded by the Norwegian People's Aid, we are not including them here. We recognise the risk that our decision to focus on the stories of refugee men further silences women's experiences here (Alhayek 2014), but, as indicated, this article is purposefully considering represented men's refugee experiences in response to the media framing of the 'crisis' as an 'invasion' of refugee men. The three selected narratives are based on testimonies co-created with Hasko, Khalid and Mohammad, Syrian men seeking asylum in Scandinavia, illustrated by London based artist Lindsay Pollock, with accompanying animations by Syrian born Wael Toubaji (http://positivenegatives.org/comics/). They were serialised in the UK's *The Guardian* and Norway's *Aftenposten*[1] (11-13 November 2015), and have been partially displayed in an exhibition launched at the Nobel Peace Centre, Oslo (November 2015) with Hasko and Khalid's stories also shown at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS), London (April-June 2017).

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[1] *Aftenposten* is by far the largest newspaper in Norway with daily print and digital circulation figures of over 210,000 in 2015 (Media Norway 2018). *The Guardian* has a daily print circulation figure of around 148,000 and a combined on-line digital platform reach of several million unique users et aNewsworks 2018).

The three men are portrayed at different stages of their arduous migrations, starting at a point in time when the journeys are (for now) concluded, and retelling experiences of those journeys up to that point. The framing of the stories on the one hand allows a certain degree of closure, helping readers to engage with content that could otherwise overwhelm. Nonetheless, the stories retain a sense of open-endedness that reflects the indeterminacy of many refugee journeys, as all of them start at a point in time when the men are still getting used to aspects of their new lives. The process of arriving and staying is neither guaranteed nor closed. We are led carefully through their individual experiences; Hasko, who left Syria as his home was destroyed by war, paid smugglers to travel across the sea on a boat, and later managed to reunite with his family; Khalid who was tortured in Syria, and ended up living in a detention centre in Norway for months before gaining asylum; and Muhammad, who fled the conflict in Syria on being called up into the army, travelled into Turkey, in desperation his family paid for him to cross the sea, after which he travelled across Europe undetected, until we leave him still living in a detention centre in Norway, waiting for a decision on his future.

Our methodological approach to the analysis of these three graphic narratives is rooted in visual analysis traditions of thinking about 'the social, the aesthetic and the technological' (Rose 1996: 284). While a detailed analysis of the modality and full range of semiotic potentials of these comic strips, as dynamic, communicative artefacts (Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014), is beyond the scope of this paper, in addressing their narratives we adopted a stepwise approach to reading and interpretation that recognises their semiotic complexity as well as their material, genre-specific form (Bateman and Wildfeuer 2014: 182). Our approach consisted of two analytical dimensions. Firstly, we focused on the semiotic choices which are made in the communication of emotion within the narratives. Feng and O'Halloran (2012) point to the analysis of facial expression, bodily orientation and touch as being critical here, all of which have allowed us to think about how it is the visual nature of these narratives which can provoke empathetic encounters, over and above the work done by the textual explanations. Importantly, however, we also recognise that the emotions of these three men are not just confined to their bodies but are working relationally and in tension with the wider structures and contexts of their positions as refugees. Therefore, secondly, we drew on the principles of critical theory analysis (Kincheloe et al 2011), using decolonial frameworks to help us examine the choices which are made in how their broader experiences and agencies are *framed*, both in terms of the literal framing – use of panels and locational contexts detailed within the graphics and narrative sequencing – but also the broader framing and production of knowledge (Mignolo 2009: 5) bound up in these publications as a discrete media collection. This has allowed us to think about the wider power dynamics which unfold both as people move into and across Europe as refugees, and in the subsequent telling of these movements. While this methodological approach has aided us in working through the visual and empathetic effectiveness and political framing of these representations, we recognise that in this process we inevitably rely on our own literacies, as white European women, as we do this (El Refaie and Hörschelmann 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Rose 2001). Our analysis thus offers an *interpretation* and presents a further encounter rather than delivering a fixed distillation of meanings produced by the graphic narratives.

Promoting Imaginative Encounters

The most immediate point to note about these narratives as a collection is that they do not shy away from making visible the trauma of the perilous journeys the men endured, and the desolation they have felt navigating the asylum process after their arrival in Scandinavia. For Hasko's story in particular the boat crossing to Europe is pivotal. An iconic image from this account (Image One), of a very full boat struggling on the ocean, is used on the front of the promotional leaflet from the SOAS exhibition and is enlarged in the exhibition itself. Existing literature on migration journeys, border spaces, deportations and biographies (Burrell 2008; Skultans 1998) chimes with this framing and the decision to foreground this aspect of the journey, in all its humanity and drama, offers a clear rebuttal to the invasion discourses of boats and shores already noted.

Image One: Commissioned by the Norwegian People's Aid and produced by PositiveNegatives

On top of this, the physical experiences of war, trauma and forced migration are vividly relayed – the suffering is shared. Visceral torture scenes are included in the recollections of being imprisoned in Syria. Hasko's account of crossing the sea illustrates the fear (and crucially here the fear is felt by the Syrian men and not the European 'hosts', fearful of invasion), as well as the crush and the vomit. Despite the trauma of this journey, however, Hasko's humanity is repeatedly emphasised. Once on dry land in Italy, for example, he loses his balance and struggles to walk straight away. His relief at being able to shower at the processing centre is given visual prominence and we see his face pointing up towards the water as it comes down, another indicator of the bodily demands of the journey and the physical nature of the trauma endured. While the violence and torture are shown unflinchingly then, these experiences are not sensationalised, leaving scope for the reader/viewer to recognise and relate to the banality and universality of these physical reactions. The horror of the situation is also communicated through its impact on family and the juxtaposition of conflict and domestic life. One particularly affecting image (Image Two) illustrates Hasko talking about his children playing war games with Lego. The specific modality of the graphic narrative genre is key here; it is the audience who have to fill in the gaps between the frames to understand these experiences (McCloud 1993). We can grasp the weight of the violence and the torture, and the impact this has had across the families, but we are not shown every detail of the suffering bodies or traumatised children; the frames simultaneously break the intensity of the hardest aspects of the experience, but force the audience to engage in the imagination of it.

Image Two: Hasko, Commissioned by the Norwegian People's Aid and produced by PositiveNegatives

The affective reach of these graphics rests especially in both the intimate nature of the first person narrative and, even more powerfully, in the expressive faces and bodies of the three men (Feng and Halloran 2012), illustrated all the way through so that their emotions can be seen – through the careful drawing of changing facial contortions and body language – as well as read in the accompanying captions. In particular, direct eye contact with the protagonist is maintained throughout, nurturing a connection with the viewer/reader that can then be worked with. In Image Three, where Mohammed is drawn early on in his story,

missing his family and looking down at photos of his parents, this loss of eye contact is equally significant; the emotional pain he is experiencing is palpable.

Image Three: Mohammad, Commissioned by the Norwegian People's Aid and produced by PositiveNegatives

Non-traumatic identities, sensual experiences and physical subjectivities are also integral in the accounts. The men are presented to us with clear backstories, as complex and rounded people who are not 'just' refugees; Khalid talks about being an Economics student at university, enjoying going out, drinking and dancing. Hasko is a pistachio loving artist (we see his easel in his apartment), and when he travels across Europe he likens it to a 'backpacking' experience. Throughout the narratives the viewer/reader is also repeatedly invited, through a series of multi-sensory devices and modalities (Kukkonen 2015) to do more than spectate. Hasko's story especially does this – at one point he talks directly to us, asking to 'join me for a walk'. A conscious corporeal encounter is thus initiated. Later on there is an invitation into his apartment (Image Four) – a clever reversal of the invasive metaphor previously discussed and a physical expression of hospitality (Rosello 2001) and connection. We are shown Mohammad's exhilaration while he is travelling across Europe trying to reach Norway, and here the sequence is slowed down, taking the time to show the reader/viewer the scenery and draw our attention to the sound of birds singing. We see him standing with his back to us, momentarily lost in the beauty of the landscape laid out before him, and without being told we can imagine the respite those moments give him.

Image Four: Hasko, Commissioned by the Norwegian People's Aid and produced by PositiveNegatives

Bodies are at the centre of these images, just as they are in anti-migrant discourse, but they are sympathetically drawn, nuanced and detailed, as people with faces and with names, and not simply amassed bodies queuing to get in (Khiabany 2016: 757-8). Crucially in these narratives too, Mohammad, Hasko and Khalid 'look' like Middle Eastern men – their ethnicity is not hidden, nor is it caricatured, exaggerated or problematised – and yet they are acting, speaking and feeling like 'ordinary' people, a relatively rare sight in western visual discourse on refugees, and a distinguishing feature from mainstream cartoons as well. The ordinariness and familiarity of the men's family bonds, which are given early prominence, and the extraordinary stress they are under, also serve to destabilise stereotypes about angry, predatory, decontexualised Middle-Eastern men. All the way through these narratives then, faces, bodies and emotions which would otherwise be routinely othered are normalised through the care and detail of the drawings. As a result, their subjectivities as men, as family members and as refugees, and the alien trauma of their experiences, are rendered less distant and more relatable, spatially, cognitively and emotionally. An important balance is struck; the level of the personalisation of suffering shown allows for the possibility of compassion (Arendt 1963), but the trauma of the refugee experience is not depicted as so unimaginable that the audience cannot grasp its meaning (Langer 1991; Ranciere 2010). These narratives are working towards a closer empathy, not a distant pity.

While these points are all important for creating a body-schema which allows people to be invited into a meaningful, empathetic encounter, significantly, they also work to acknowledge the 'bio-graphic or body-politics of knowledge' (Mignolo 2011: xxii) that being a Syrian refugee in northern Europe brings. Spivak (1999/2010: 64) makes an important, and much examined, point about 'speaking' and women's presence, even middle class ones, in archives in colonial India. As she later reflects, one of the women in her discussion 'cannot speak to us' because colonial history did not deem it necessary to keep any record of her life, and 'indigenous' history would only do so by recording her funeral. The sati-suicide of Bhubaneswari, the central woman in her account, is analysed with the suggestion that only in her death and by turning her body into a text was her life acknowledged. On a literal level refugee bodies are, too, turned into texts through these graphic narratives, with all the political meaning, and risk and vulnerability (Darling 2017: 191), this visibility carries. Moreover, not only are these texts literally shaped by these bodies, but, like sati, the underlying cause and process of this experience is one of violence – fleeing danger, enduring highly dangerous journeys. The transformation of body into text opens it up, on the one hand, to the unanswerable sceptic's charge of not being 'real', while on the other hand presenting a way to commemorate refugee experiences within a structurally and epistemically violent regime. Indeed, in such a context, turning bodies into texts is almost the only way to make space for these voices to speak, and these experiences to be seen. Albeit highly gendered, the narratives can be read as new decolonial archives, contributing an acknowledgement of experience, a 'politics of presence', and another way of inscribing the participation of refugees in social worlds as a 'statement of social fact' (Darling 2017: 189, 191). Arguably the accounts of Dana and Nadia, as women's stories, have an even better claim here, acknowledging a position which is, as yet, still disproportionately occluded in refugee texts.

Decolonial Archives of European Security and the 'Refugee Crisis'

There is real potential, then, for these narratives to be examined as decolonial archives. To take a coloniality/decolonial lens is to see these graphic narratives as texts and images which can 'affirm thinking and doing in regions and bodies who were disqualified from thinking' (Mignolo 2011: xxii). These accounts actively and consciously present 'geo-historical and bio-graphical genealogies of thoughts' which Mignolo (2011: xxiii) argues are 'at the very inception of decolonial thinking'. They do just this in their presentation of a greater plurality of knowledge and thinking about, and interactions with, European security and European systems of othering. Confrontations with Fortress Europe are featured across the accounts. Hasko's boat is met near Italy by coastguards dressed, inexplicably, in white masks, hats and gloves, and he notices the oblivious holiday makers on the beach nearby, and the intrusion of the photographers taking pictures of the disorientated refugees. A different perspective of European border zones is offered – alien, aggressive, disconnected – and of Europeans who 'don't want to make it too easy' to get there. The aggression is pronounced in Mohammad's story as he faces police brutality in Hungary: 'In Hungary they have built a razor-wire fence against refugees, a hundred miles long. The Prime Minister said Hungary was for Hungarians and Europe must be kept Christian'. Mohammad tries everything he can to avoid getting his fingerprints taken in Hungary, because of his awareness of the Dublin Agreement, but is unsuccessful and is processed there before being turned out onto the streets after two weeks.

The social borders encountered once in Europe are carefully drawn too. At the start of Hasko's story he tries to help a Scandinavian woman who has dropped something on the way to her car, only to be met with overt hostility; we do not need a textual commentary to witness her looking fearful and irritated by his overture, locking her car quickly and driving away, and to see his deflated body language in response, a reaction which is carefully depicted over for four separate frames. Europeans are drawn as universally white and blond, and overt observations about Scandinavian society are dotted throughout – Jens the Norwegian talking about the beautiful forests immediately outside the immigration detention centre, which Khalid is allowed to enjoy only before his curfew falls (Image Five). The visual juxtaposition of the free Norwegian keen to connect with the landscape and the incarcerated Syrian, sharing the same space but on different terms, is stark.

Image Five: Khalid, Commissioned by the Norwegian People's Aid and produced by PositiveNegatives

The apparent foreignness of Scandinavia is illustrated too. It is snowing in Oslo when Mohammad arrives, and Hasko looks unsure as he reads a jar of pickled fish he comes across in his hunt for pistachios. Depictions like these are a reminder of how rare it is for northern Europe to be refracted through the eyes of 'others', especially in medias published in Norway and the UK. While some of these observations may appear stereotypical, rehearsing binaries in different ways, the important point here is that the centre of knowledge, norms and perspective lies with the Syrian men, even though the power does not; it is the Europeans, and the northern European landscapes, which are other in their testimonies.

One further point to make about the decolonial characteristics of these narratives is the uncertainty that permeates them. As already suggested, in one sense the three stories are quite neatly packaged chronologically in conventionally linear accounts, as they need to be to have a broader appeal and resonance. This impression of linearity, of linear argument (Mignolo 2011: xxiii) is perhaps misleading though. The main threads are not always clear cut in some of the accounts, and there is not always resolution at the end. There is a truthfulness, for example, in Mohammad's account about the need to work to send money home – a dangerously nuanced perspective to espouse given the shape of much anti-migrant, anti-refugee discourse (Fassin 2013). While Hasko is reunited with his family, Mohammad's story 'ends' with him still waiting in Norway, worrying about being deported back to Hungary and stuck in a desolate limbo. There is no totality of knowledge (Quijano 2007: 174) offered, no hegemony of discourse and experience. These are fragments of encounters with European morality and security regimes which are not easy to generalise; instead they promote a more pluriversal geo-political understanding of what these regimes might mean for non-Europeans.

It is quite seductive to think of these arresting narratives in this way, as part of a decolonial imaginary (Pérez 1999) and a deliberate attempt to write and draw these experiences into history, changing the terms of the conversation as well as the content (Mignolo 2009: 4) and producing new archives of migration and control in 21st century Europe. There are difficult questions to ask, however, about the wider contexts and power at play in this work, funded

by the Norwegian government, a country which, while it has supported colonially aware work through its development agency 'Africa for Norway' initiatives (Jefferess 2013), also has a long history of missionary zeal and a barely acknowledged colonial past (Eidsvik 2012; Skeie 2001) and, in spite of its public commitment to peace, a lucrative arms exportation business (Curti 2009). To draw on Mignolo (2011: xv) again, attention to location sees that this apparent decoloniality is largely a western creation: 'Inclusion is a one-way street and not a reciprocal right. In a world governed by the colonial matrix of power, he who includes and she who is welcomed to be included stand in codified power relations'. There is still a sense that through these comics 'they', as Syrians, are being incorporated into 'our' codes, into 'our' spaces, rather than there being a more radical epistemic challenge unfolding here (Jefferess 2013). Some of the foregrounding of conspicuously classed and arguably western lifestyles in the backstories, for example, opens up questions about the extent to which the representation of these experiences may have been consciously shaped in production so that they are more relatable to a North European audience, a position which may encourage empathy but simultaneously exposes the limits of the parameters of the whole exercise and the true decoloniality of the narratives. Some of the language used by one of the patrons of PositiveNegatives to describe the comics also inadvertently reinforces a wider politics at play, of 'us' and 'them', of the enunciators and enunciated (Mignolo 2009: 5), reinstating the distance that the narratives work so hard to diminish: 'They tell *us* real life stories and make *us* hear the voices of unique individuals. But they also make it possible for *us* to hear the voices of the millions of individuals standing behind them' (emphasis added).

These points, made about some of the most thoughtful and progressive images on offer relating to the 'refugee crisis', underline the impossibility of being wholly decolonial; narratives such as these are 'discovered', created, produced and disseminated in a western context which they are not able to sit outside of. They are powerful, valuable and necessary, but they are, and can only ever be, just partially radical in their decolonialiality.

Conclusions

It is clear that these graphic narratives, however well intentioned, are limited in what they can do to decolonise how refugee experiences are framed, even less to change how refugees are treated in contemporary Europe. The power that comics can generate is severely mismatched against a security regime like Fortress Europe, and when contending with an active media which finds it so easy to demonise others, in so many different forms and through more and more different kinds of mechanisms. It would be unrealistic to expect otherwise and for these kinds of narratives to be able to completely transcend the yoke of coloniality which has been established for so long, and from which they too emerge. They also cannot force people to engage – as Berger (1972: 8) reminds us, 'to look is an act of choice'. Their reach is therefore limited in many different ways.

And yet, we argue here that these graphic narratives are vital for different reasons. In what they do – sensitive, thoughtful portrayals drawn from the words of refugees themselves – they find a way to reach out to a wider audience with a nuanced and destabilising message, and they bring an empathetic possibility that, although we can see is flawed, is still desperately needed. The work that is done through these comics with young people, in schools, is especially important and signals a steely intent – a passion within the compassion

(Arendt 1963: 75) – to do more than represent but to galvanise change too, and for this change to be affective through future generations. This discussion cannot measure the success of this attempt here, but it can underline why this *action* in itself is so significant. The wider politics of the project behind the comics is not to just spectate and commentate, but to act (Sondag 2003: 90).

Moreover, what these graphic narratives do is stand in contempt of the endemic racism embedded in so many media discussions of the 'refugee crisis'. By handling this material, and these stories, with such care, they highlight the violence of the images that abound, and the baseness of cartoons which harm people when at their most vulnerable and photographs which perpetuate established depictions of people seeking sanctuary, men especially, as invasive and threatening. They also challenge the wider political and societal structures which have accepted these visual discourses as normal. We would argue here too that narratives such as these should make academic researchers take more notice of the progressive, as well as the malignant, power of the visual. It is not enough now to only analyse the racialised violences which are perpetuated in visual discourse. We need to deepen our understandings of how the affective qualities and potentialities of the visual, here exemplified through the modalities of the graphic narrative genre, can offer an alternative way of seeing.

We see a much wider relevance embedded within these comic strips then. These narratives are radical in their belief that better representations are possible, that the reading public in countries like Norway and the UK could be persuaded to engage with more complicated scenarios and more sympathetic depictions. There is a gentle radicalness here which offers an important contribution to public discourse, made all the more so by the stark contrast with the standard of public discourses which oscillate around them. In such an era of 'fake news' and simplified narratives it is radical to be nuanced, radical to be sensitive, and radical to push so hard for a politics of care.

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