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Published in:
Contexts of Violence in Comics

Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal

Citation for published version (APA):
Nabizadeh, G. (2019). The Lives of Others: Figuring Grievability and Justice in Contemporary Comics and Graphic Novels. In I. Horton, I. Hague, & N. Mickwitz (Eds.), *Contexts of Violence in Comics* (1 ed.). Routledge.

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Download date: 12. Dec. 2024

Author Accepted Manuscript version of Nabizadeh, G 2019, The Lives of Others: Figuring Grievability and Justice in Contemporary Comics and Graphic Novels. in I Horton, I Hague & N Mickwitz (eds), Contexts of Violence in Comics. 1 edn, Routledge. Published version: https://www.routledge.com/Contexts-of-Violence-in-Comics-1st-Edition/Hague-Gordon-Mickwitz/p/book/9781138484504

The Lives of Others: Figuring Grievability and Justice in Contemporary Comics and Graphic Novels

Golnar Nabizadeh

Introduction

This chapter considers representations of law and justice in selected comics through the notion of cultural grief and 'grievability'. Visual narratives can be positioned to disrupt or support dominant ideologies within local, regional and global contexts, and this becomes particularly important when exploring people and places that may be unknown or unfamiliar. Comics scholars have long emphasised the ways that the medium can operate as a politically engaged form of inquiry, as artists generate unique ways of imagining subjectivity, and challenging discursive iterations ascribed to minority cultures in conscious and unconscious ways (Chute 2010; Mickwitz 2016; El Refaie 2012; Adams 2008 et al). In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler identifies the potential for grief to generate political agency, asking, '[w]ho counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?' (20). Butler emphasises the transformative possibilities that loss may provoke for individuals and communities. Globally, the widespread loss of life through conflict and state sanctioned violence, among other events, mean that questions about whose lives are acknowledge as such, and whose are disavowed, remain pertinent to debates about the recognition of human rights. This epistemological enquiry is named 'cultural mourning', with an emphasis on exploring the value of recognizing, rather than seeking to recuperate, loss.

The discussion will progress in three parts; firstly, grievability is anchored via the concept of ‘cultural mourning’, that is, the notion that human life is inevitably marked, or touched, by loss, and that grief acquires not only personal, but also public and social dimensions that can offer significant insights into how we are bounded to our ‘others’ (Derrida 2001; Butler 2005 & 2009; Caruth 1996). The next section offers an in-depth analysis of mourning and melancholia, as delineated by Freud, before turning to the productivities of melancholy – a modern articulation of attachment to loss – in relation to the recognition of historically marginalized subjects, and bringing this understanding to bear on Kiyama’s *The Four Immigrants Manga* (1999). The final section will consider representations of justice in *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* (2009) by Emannuel Guibert, Didier Lefèvre and Frédéric Lemercier, and Safdar Ahmed’s online comic *Villawood* (2015).

The ‘textural’ qualities of comics, their particular aesthetic and verbal strategies through which these stories are conveyed, articulate detailed, and counter-historical narratives that frequently embed efforts to raise readers’ consciousness within their pages.[i] Examples include Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2011), *American Born Chinese* (2006) by Gene Luen Yang, and Keiji Nakazawa’s *Barefoot Gen* series (1976-1980). The techniques that comics creators use to shape their respective story-worlds can help recuperate marginalised subjectivities such as women, refugees, people with disabilities, LGBT+, among other groups, as they focus on personal stories about loss and resilience. These themes remain highly relevant in contemporary global crises. The claim for the centrality of grief to modern life thus rests on the recognition of widespread loss of human life due to political violence, social persecution, and the systemic disavowal of lives that are not regarded as ‘grievable’.

By framing the inquiry via a consideration of the productivities of loss, this chapter suggests that understood as a social, as well as private, phenomenon, grief offers a useful prism to explore the shared construction of identity politics. These fields of inquiry have been influenced by the literary theory of Cathy Caruth, particularly her work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992) has also provided ground breaking critical research on the intersections between memory, trauma and testimony in relation to framing and representations of the Holocaust. In the last two decades, Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), and David Palumbo-Liu's *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age* (2012) have all extended debates around intersubjectivity, violence and trauma in contemporary contexts. In the field of visual studies specifically, Nicholas Mirzoeff's *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (2011) delineates the genealogy of visual culture via postmodernism and suggests that visuality, and that the 'right to look' (or countervisuality) is interpolated within a complex of power relations.

A precedent for the kind of work proposed by the current chapter is Mieke Bal's full-length study on the political art of Doris Salcedo, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Art* (2010). Bal suggests that Salcedo's primarily non-verbal installation art (or performance) induces a kind of 'affective contagiousness' that encourages viewers to respond to the 'reality of precarious states' (106). In relation to visual culture more broadly, Marianne Hirsch writes about the legacies of historical trauma in her work *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012). Originally developed in relation to the individual, collective and cultural legacies of trauma in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (2003), Hirsch explores 'postmemory', or the inheritance of traumatic memory, in relation to other contexts, such as the generations of stolen children in Australia, and dictatorships in Latin America. Hirsch emphasises the way that subsequent generations maintain a creative investment in the past, particularly through visual technologies. Understood as a historiography of affect, the study of loss allows alternative social and individual histories to emerge from the annals of time.Visual cultures such as comics can thus tend to pasts and people that are frequently occluded from dominant public discourses. Indeed, the historically marginalised status of comics, at least in the West, has meant that they are able to incorporate a multiplicity of perspectives. Early comics were ephemera in a material sense—designed to last only a day or two after their publication in Sunday newspapers. As Jared Gardner argues, "it cannot be entirely a coincidence that at precisely the period of the greatest wave of new immigrant into the United States—predominantly from Eastern Europe and Asia—the *sequential* comics form first emerged in the United States", and that the shift in the newspaper workforce helped shape the emergence of stories about "racial and ethnic 'Others'" (135). The 1950s saw the rise of censorship in comics across the United States and Australia, as authorities became concerned with the alleged detrimental impact of comics on the social behaviour of children and adolescents. In recent decades, however, this trend has been reversed as comics have become popular vehicles for social criticism, frequently in the form of autobiography and memoir.

The respective works by Butler and Hirsch intersects with a public conversation between Gayatri Spivak and Eduardo Cadava from 2004 entitled 'The Politics of Mourning'. In a discussion moderated by Jean-Michael Rabaté, Spivak and Cadava focus on Derrida's work on mourning, while using the occasion to contemplate the meaning of his then-recent death. The speakers assign mourning a specifically political mandate, distinguishing this from the depoliticized process (at least in the West) that is sometimes associated with grief as a solely private experience. By contrast, Cadava suggests that grief conveys something about the individual as it reveals our connection to others—and that this recognition can offer valuable insights for connectivity within the public realm. He draws on Derrida's work on the relationality between self and other—which Derrida refers to as the 'trace' of the other—instantiates both dispossession and boundedness because it reveals the bonds that persist in the face of loss and absence.

Mourning and Melancholia

The cornerstone of the modern discourse on loss is Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917). His essay describes the different kinds of responses to the loss of 'a loved person', or 'some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, and ideal, and so on' (243). In either case, the loss is felt to be that of an 'object' in the psychoanalytic sense. Freud observes that there are two kinds of affective reactions to loss; mourning, on the one hand, and melancholia on the other. In mourning, the individual eventually de-cathects, or detaches, his or her libidinal investment in the lost object, and is therefore free to reattach that energy to another object. For Freud, mourning is carried out through grief work, or *Trauerarbeit,* which is produced through an active remembrance of the lost object—what Tammy Clewell describes as a kind of 'hyperremembering' (2004, 44).

This intensely focused form of remembrance is the correlative of the more general process of reality testing, and it is through this remembrance that the mourner accepts that the object 'no longer exists' (Freud 1917, 255). Here, the ego, driven by its narcissistic interest for survival, dissolves the attachment with the lost object, as it confronts the threat of its own extinction (255). In this account, the subject does not identify with the lost object, but rather, through the painstaking progression of *Trauerarbeit*, re-establishes the boundaries of his or her ego. By retracting the libido from the lost entity, the ego inures itself against the further importation of loss that afflicts the melancholic subject. The distinction is the after-effects of the object's loss, which arise from the individual's inability (or disinterest) to de-cathect his or her libidinal energy from the lost object. In contrast to mourning, in melancholia, some element of the loss remains unconscious, so that the subject knows 'whom he (sic) has lost but not what he has lost in him' (245).

The outcome of this unconscious aspect of the loss is that the subject withdraws the libido into the ego, so that the latter begins to identify with the abandoned object. Freud identifies narcissism as the mechanism that enables this identification, a technology of the self that acts as a substitute for the 'erotic cathexis'. Moreover, the substitution takes place as one relation consumes the other, in accordance with the ego's oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development (258). The melancholic relation with the lost object is thus characterised by ambivalence, where 'hate and love contend with each other; the one seeks to detach the libido from the object, the other to maintain this position of the libido against the assault' (256). This process is characterised by Freud's statement; '[i]n mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself' (246). The diminution of the mourning period is signposted by the subject's ability to re-append the libido onto a substitute object. Once this process is enabled, the 'poor and empty' world bears, unexpectedly, the fruits of the subject's labour, and thus the period of mourning arrives at a 'spontaneous end' (Freud 1915, 307). Indeed, Freud's conception of melancholy can be further understood in relation to an earlier iteration in Classical humoural theory, where the four humours—blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm—were considered to play in important part in regulating temperament and mood. Physician-scholars from this era most notably Hippocrates (5th century B.C.E.) and later Galen (131-201 C.E.) argued that melancholia, a morose and maudlin state of mind (often associated with philosophic or artistic preoccupations) was caused by an excess of black bile.[ii] As Eng and Kazanjian suggest, the "classical trace of melancholia's corporeal origins calls attention to the twentieth century's vigorous, often catastrophic, embodiments of loss—over and against intervening splits between body and mind, spirit and matter (8). In this way, the historical conception of melancholia bears upon contemporary debates on loss and mourning—evident in works such as Kristeva's *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1992) and *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* by Judith Butler (1997). Perhaps the most significant shift on the conception of melancholy as figured in these works, among others, is its de-pathologisation and reconfiguration as an affective constellation that cleaves subject formation with political discourses—particularly notable in relation to queer and migrant subjectivities.

One example is Anne Anlin Cheng's exploration of the role of melancholy in the production of minority subjects in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (2001). Extrapolating on the work of Freud, Bhabha, and Butler, among others, Cheng's study focuses on identity formation for Asian and African-Americans, with particular attention to the unspoken dynamics of race relations in the United States. Cheng argues that 'public grievance is a social forum and luxury to which the racially melancholic minorities have little or no access' (174). Within the strictures of the modern nation, these minorities hold an uncomfortable position as the recognition of their grief remains outside communal acknowledgement. And yet, this grief does not simply dissipate, but perversely, informs the defences of the nation. Similarly, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha argues that the presence of minority, especially migrant, subjects within modern nations articulates:

> [T]he death-in-life of the idea of the 'imagined community' of the nation; the worn-out metaphors of the resplendent national life now circulate in another narrative of entry-permits and passports and work-permits that at once preserve and proliferate, bind and breach the human rights of the nation. Across the accumulation of the history of the West there are those people who speak the encrypted discourse of the melancholic and the migrant. (236)

The 'migrant', then circulates as a figure that threatens the nation as its 'death-in-life', wedged as it is between elision and hushed forms of recognition within and beyond the borders of the nation. Narratives of 'encrypted discourse', to use Bhabha's term, form the central concern of Cheng's study, who suggests that melancholia (in accordance with Freud's model of ego-formation) provides a 'provocative metaphor for how race in America, or more specifically, how the act of racialization, works' (50). Cheng suggests that melancholic migrant narratives speak back to the erasure of migrant subjectivities under narratives of the American nation, whose very constitution depends on the simultaneous recognition and disavowal of those identities.

Drawing against erasure is evident in Henry Yoshitaka Kiyama's *The Four Immigrants Manga*, originally self-published as a collected graphic novel in Japan in 1931, which explores the challenges faced by Japanese migrants to the United States, and specifically in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Kiyama created the work while living as an art student in San Francisco. The story follows the lives of four protagonists (Henry, Frank, Charlie, and Fred) over 52 self-contained episodes that provide an invaluable interface between the characters' lived experiences and events of historic and cultural significance. One such episode, entitled 'The Great War', conveys the struggle for citizenship faced by Japanese immigrants, focalized through Charlie's desire for inclusion. Kiyama uses a conversation between two friends, Charlie and Frank, to situate political and legal concerns of historic significance for the *Issei* (first generation Japanese migrants to the U.S.). The episode commences with Charlie's address to Frank that he is thinking of joining the U.S. army, to fight in World War I, in an effort to be awarded citizenship (*Figure 1*). In the second panel, he declaims with an outstretched arm, '[s]ome people say Americans won't recognize us 'til we have 10,000 *tombstones* in our San Mateo cemetery. But I think I oughta join up, get citizenship, and then run for *president!*'. Frank's response, 'Now *there's* an idea', coupled with his furrowed brow, suggests that he shares Charlie's concern for recognition (italics in original, 118).

<Insert Figure 1 here>

Caption: From *The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904-1924* by Henry (Yoshitaka) Kiyama, translated by Frederik L. Schodt, p. 118. © Estate of Yoshitaka Kiyama, Frederik L. Schodt. Used by permission of Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, California.

Here, Kiyama configures citizenship negatively through loss, that is, through the notion that 10,000 Japanese individuals must lose their lives in order to be conferred recognition by the nation. Charlie's ambitious plan to run as a Presidential candidate almost eclipses his preparedness to risk losing his life to improve his political and legal status in the U.S. His opening statement, however, frames this desire within a broader recognition of boundedness to the *Issei*, thus, ‘I’ve been thinking ‘bout the future of our countrymen in America’. In the third panel, Frank and Charlie meet for a drink after the latter has signed up for military service, and Kiyama shares a tongue-in-cheek joke via Frank, who states, ‘if you don’t come back alive our cartoonist’ll run out of ideas!’. The next four panels depict imagined scenes of battle as Charlie slices the bodies of two German soldiers. His cavalier statement, ‘[t]ime to let’em taste the steel of [his] *samurai* sword’ supports the stylised and cartoony rendition of battle (*Figure 2*). As with his depictions of other events, Kiyama infuses this gruesome battle scene with irony, as the ease with which Charlie cuts through the German soldiers demonstrates the ‘superior’ quality of his samurai sword.

<Insert Figure 2 here>

Caption: From *The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904-1924* by Henry (Yoshitaka) Kiyama, translated by Frederik L. Schodt, p. 119. © Estate of Yoshitaka Kiyama, Frederik L. Schodt. Used by permission of Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, California.

Surviving the War, Charlie triumphantly returns to San Francisco with a collection of Pickelhaube[iii] as ‘booty’, which he claims demonstrates his knack for fighting strategically. Charlie then informs Frank that his next move is to ‘buy some land, marry a white woman, and build a *home*’ (italics denote the hand-lettering used in the English translation) (119). As Frederick Schodt suggests, Kiyama’s inclusion of these aspirations may have provoked ‘an ironic, slightly bitter laugh’ by the comic’s contemporary Japanese American readers, because Charlie’s plans to ‘buy land, marry a white woman, and obtain citizenship—were illegal at this time’ (145). Despite serving as a soldier, citizenship is still withheld. Frank and Charlie go to the Town Hall, where the latter requests citizenship from the Mayor in ‘broken’ English.

In response, the Mayor casually states, ‘Um! Not for Orientals yet’, and as Frank mutters ‘Uh, oh…’, Charlie adopts a pose of intense surprise, his hat lifting off his head with the marks, ‘?!’, signifying his range of responses. Coupled with a dismissive wave of his hand, the ease with which the Mayor discharges Charlie’s case demonstrates the struggles faced by *Issei* in having access to equal opportunities. Indeed, Japanese migrants would not be entitled to the right to apply for citizenship until decades hence, when Congress passed the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952*. Standing outside City Hall, Charlie complains, ‘After that, I feel like a real idiot…’, and Kiyama ends the episode with the trademark levity that marks each incident in *The Four Immigrants Manga* as Frank quips, ‘Guess you don’t always have a knack for *strategy* after all, eh, Charlie?!’ (119). The combination of word and image in this episode allows Kiyama to economically and effectively display the systematic disenfranchisement of the *Issei* under successive administrations, and the ways in which their civil rights were curtailed or denied under a variety of legal and political privations.

The melancholic figure of the migrant finds a belated form of recognition within the text. Kiyama’s text utilizes these characteristics of the medium to great effect, recuperating the occluded figure of the *Issei* within the pages of his story, without seeking to resolve the tensions that permeate the text. For minority subjects, who frequently navigate legal and political incursions, comics offer a textual analogue to a world where verbal and visual cues are conjoined, and meaning acquired through their interdependence. David Eng similarly argues that melancholia can be used as a model for political agency:

> [P]eople of color and postcolonials are all coerced to relinquish and yet to identify with socially disparaged objects on their psychic paths to subjectivity

> […] If, for instance, there is no public language by which a loss can be recognized, then melancholia assumes a social dimension of contemporary consequence that must be acknowledged and analysed as a problem of the political. (2000, 1278)

In Eng's words, melancholia can thus be used to mobilise a politics of grief that lies outside public regimes of mourning, and which can speak back to politics across private and public realms. Migrations—traumatic or otherwise—similarly involve processes that can be powerfully expressed through the apparatus of visual narration. As a fractured narrative medium, comics offer a productive scaffold—one characterized by gutters that fragment the story-world of the text—on which responses to trauma and loss can be built. The 'interdependent' gap between the respective written and visual syntaxes, thus appends two distinct levels of meaning—literal and metonymic—to the text.

Modern comics frequently critique the policies and ideologies that shape real-world circumstances. In his introduction to Joe Sacco's graphic novel *Palestine* (2001), Edward Said wrote that comics seemed to defy, 'the ordinary processes of thought, which are policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of … ideological pressures', concluding, 'comics freed me to think and imagine and see differently' (ii). The production of the new, the exciting, the unorthodox, to which Said attests, are the kinds of creations that Marianne Hirsch focuses on when she emphasizes the 'relation of visuality to the experience and the transmission of personal and cultural trauma— trauma that may be unspeakable but may be communicated viscerally and emotionally through the alternative cognitive structures of the visual' (2004, 1211).

'Cognitive structures of the visual', to use Hirsch's phrase, find two forms of representation in Guibert, Lefèvre, and Lemercier*'s The Photographer*, where Didier Lefèvre's journey with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), is transmitted via drawn and photographic strips. Didier was invited to accompany MSF on its mission to Northern Afghanistan in 1985 during the Afghan-Soviet war, with the specific assignment of photographing the impact of the war on the civilian population. He took around 4,000 photographs on the mission, including a few that he thought would stand as a testament to his death after becoming stranded on his return journey to Pakistan. Guibert utilised photographs and drawn images in tandem, to reconstruct Didier's story. The co-presence of the photographs and the drawn images establishes a dynamic storyline where readers must creatively navigate between each form to identify the nuances, gaps, and slips of the narrative.

In one sequence, the group sets up camp in a village in North Afghanistan, Didier notes that, '[t]he days pass and along come the wounded. Followed by more wounded, and more, and still more wounded', a statement accompanied by photographic images of the doctors receiving multiple patients. One of the doctors, Robert, treats a man with a bullet wound in his back. The narrative notes that although the man has what would usually be referred to as a 'minor wound', 'it's useful to witness what a person with a minor wound has to go through' (127). Overleaf, twenty images from a photographic contact sheet occupy most of the page, unaccompanied by text, as they capture subtle shifts in posture and angle as Robert extracts the bullet from the patient's body.

In this sequence, the moment-to-moment transitions decelerate the pace of reading as the reader absorbs the witnessing taking place through the camera lens. In this sequence, the images slowly 'zoom' onto the procedure from mid-shot to close-up, so that the reader becomes increasingly acquainted with the man and his expressions of pain as the bullet is extracted. The final panel on the page comprises of text only, as Didier's voice re-enters to explain,

> That’s a scene I’ve seen a hundred times at the movies: the hero takes a swig of whisky, bites down on a piece of wood, and aaargh! They extract the bullet with pliers in one sharp tug, then the guy wipes the sweat from his brow and is fine. The truth is that the whole thing is excruciatingly painful. (128)

Didier’s words draw attention to the representation of pain as witnessed in a visual documentary format compared to their stylised depiction in feature films. By the time the reader arrives at Didier’s statement about the excruciating pain of the procedure, they have already seen the patient’s agony captured through the photographs, the absence of a narrative voice amplifying the horror of the event (Adams 2008, 62). Contact sheets are frequently discarded, a form of ‘visual detritus’ associated with popular culture (64). Yet in *The Photographer*, they are used to great effect, offering significant insights into the ways in which lives in the Middle East are witnessed—through the camera, as well as drawn—and which begins a process of grievability, for the individuals whose lives and losses are recorded within the pages of the work. In the words of Jeff Adams, comics and graphic novels thus act ‘as a medium for recounting societal or collective memory’, and ‘facilitate the ways in which we come to experience, and to know, traumatic history’ (67).

Commenting on Freud’s formulation of trauma, Cathy Caruth explains that this phenomenon is caused by ‘a shock that appears to work very much like a threat to the body’s spatial integrity, but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time’ (1993, 25). Judith Butler describes trauma as a radical ‘interruption’ to the life narrative that sustains our being-in-the-world:

> If a life is constituted through a fundamental interruption, even interrupted prior to the possibility of any continuity, then narrative reconstruction will also have to be subject to an interruption if it is to approximate the life it means to convey. Of course, learning to construct a narrative is a crucial

> practice, especially when discontinuous bits of experience remain dissociated from one another by virtue of traumatic conditions. (2001, 32)

Breaks in linear temporality, then, are one hallmark of traumatised time and each of respective narratives under examination, evoke—by different means—this conception of fissured time, where the past and present bear painfully upon each other. Safdar Ahmed's comic, *Villawood*, depicts the author's first visit to the eponymous detention centre in Sydney, Australia. At the centre, he sets up a 'small art workshop' as a way to 'get to know people', finding that, 'without always putting it into words, some refugees draw about their experiences' prior to their arrival in Australia, as well as in detention. One of the detainees, Ahmad, depicts his experience of indefinite detention through a symbolic composition, alongside a smaller sketch (*Figure 3*).

<Insert Figure 3 here>

Caption: From Safdar Ahmed, *Villawood: Notes from an immigration detention centre*, web comic, GetUp! - The Shipping News.

Consisting of a collection of images, the first panel appears to have been drawn over a relatively extended period, while the adjoining panel is more realistically rendered, with iconic representation of Ahmad's face drawn behind a wire fence. The abstracted elements in the first panel, such as the scales, weeping eye, and candle-leg chained to a wall, are not placed in a sequential order but arranged schematically. This arrangement encourages readers to bring a range of associations to bear on how the elements may be understood in relation to one another. The move between the two modes of signification—symbolic, and realistic—speaks of the way in which the representation of traumatic events can affix themselves to multiple forms of expressions, as they speak of a fractured relationship with, in this instance, indefinite detention while grappling with other traumata. Here, meaning is deferred so that it exists in between these alternate forms of representation.

The comic also reproduces Ahmad's handwriting, noting that the latter would write 'beautiful couplets on napkins in Urdu' (*Figure 4*).

<Insert Figure 4 here>

Caption: From Safdar Ahmed, *Villawood: Notes from an immigration detention centre*, web comic, GetUp! - The Shipping News.

While a translation of a selected couplet is provided, the colouring and texture of the panel background invites the reader to stay with the image over a longer duration in time. Ahmad's handwriting acts as a trace of his now belated presence, a reminder of his death from a presumed heart attack while in detention. This textual presence speaks against his erasure; the inclusion of his story, and drawings in *Villawood* creates a literal frame of recognition that persists beyond his death. By including images drawn by the asylum seekers, the comic acts as a melancholic reminder of the lives that have been lived, and some lost, in Australian detention centres—lives that have not been recognized as such in mainstream Australian legal and political discourses, and which may otherwise remain ungrievable.

In late 2017, the UNHCR described the humanitarian crisis on Manus Island as 'a damning indictment of a policy meant to avoid Australia's international obligations' (Davidson). At the time of writing, Manus Island is in the process of being closed down, with most detainees being deported to the United States, excluding nationals from the eight countries (Chad, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen) broadly barred from entry under the Trump administration's travel ban (Amnesty). For those subjects, there is now a double exclusion underway. In the words of Behrouz Bochani, a Kurdish journalist and detainee on Manus Island, 'refugees have been able to reconfigure the images of themselves as passive actors and weak subjects into active agents and fierce resistors', and as a group that has been able to 'refashion the image of themselves as the 'Other' (2017). The work that *Villawood* performs supports this 'refashioning', to use Bochani's term as it depicts not only some aspects of the lived experiences of the asylum seekers, but also their creativity and resilience in the face of trauma.

Conclusion

Comics panels, and the gutters that help shape them, offer a visual cognate to the lacunae that punctuate language itself. The tension generated within and across the panels that make up a comic, and through the gaps between word and image are ideally suited to exploring the discrepancies in the distribution of justice, by recovering the human subjects who are otherwise ignore or rendered invisible through some forms of legal discourse. The recognition of loss in comics, thereby offers a productive hermeneutic through which to explore the representation of law and justice in relation to particular stories about history, place, and identity. In *Precarious Life,* Butler identifies the potential for grief to activate a variety of political and social processes, and emphasises the impact that loss engenders in terms of its transformative possibilities. The acknowledgement that each subject is changed—perhaps irrevocably—by the loss of another, highlights the ongoing relevance of grief to social, cultural, and political life. The work of mourning can thus be understood as a productive process that can help recognize the significance of ongoing relationship between individuals, culture, and grief.

It is within the framework of such boundedness, and the vexed relations that constitute the social realm, that this chapter has explored the representation of grievability and literary justice in comics. Visual narratives are an important source of subjective and sensory detail and offer unique insights into historical and social traumas. They also offer empirical detail about different and changing ways of seeing the world and its contents. In a meditation on the image and narrative, Tobin Siebers writes, ‘[t]he image may teach nothing, but it does open wounds’ (2004, 1320). By extension, for those who are unable to mourn within dominant discourses of nationhood, the ongoing recognition of ‘wounds’, or traumas, becomes a politically infused strategy of resistance to losses that remain attached to figures such as that of the migrant—a person whose recognition is frequently elided within public discourses of grief.

Cheng similarly argues that, ‘[t]he model of melancholia can help us comprehend grief and loss on the part of the aggrieved, not just as a symptom but also as a dynamic process with both coercive and transformative potentials for political imagination’ (xi). Thus, melancholia may be invoked as a politically charged position that signifies resistance towards the occlusion of grief in the public domain. While the comics discussed here dramatise a response to loss and injustice, they offer only partially redemptive or consolatory resolutions to the pain of grief. Instead, they retain an open-ended engagement with the past, and demonstrate an attempt to honour the pain of loss, and particularly the loss of individual subjects through a form of cultural mourning and grievability. Framed in this way, attention to the productivities of melancholia can provide one way of exploring the nexus between social justice, affect, and political agency in the world today.

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[i] Chute uses the term ‘texture’ to describe the dynamic attributes of the comics page, that is, ‘its flexible page architecture; its sometimes consonant, sometimes dissonant visual and verbal narratives; and its structural threading of absence and presence’ (2008, p. 94).

[ii] Robert Burton’s tome, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, first published in 1621, explored melancholy—among other conditions—as a condition of multiple valences, that is, as a matter of disposition as well as a potentially excessive response to bereavement.

[iii] ‘Pickelhaube’ refers to the distinctive spiked helmets worn by German soldiers in World War I.