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## **Mourning and Empathy in Graphic Life Narratives**

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**Forum Contribution – “Mourning and Empathy in Graphic Life Narratives”**

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Dr Golnar Nabizadeh is Lecturer in Comics Studies at the University of Dundee where she teaches on the Comics & Graphic Novels MLitt, as well as undergraduate Humanities modules. Her research interests are graphic justice, critical theory, trauma and memory studies. She has published on the work of Alison Bechdel, Marjane Satrapi, Shaun Tan, and the Australian online comic “At Work in Our Detention Centres: A Guard’s Story”, among others. She is the author of *Representation and Memory in Graphic Novels* (Routledge 2019).

## Mourning and Empathy in Graphic Life Narratives

This contribution explores the role of ethics and empathy in graphic life narratives through the notion of ‘grievability’ (as discussed by Judith Butler) and the work of comics such as Safdar Ahmed’s *Villawood* in portraying and mourning the loss of lives that may otherwise remain unacknowledged by broader newsmedia. Contemporary comics artists have often helped generate alternate archives of remembrance through their respective works, wherein figurations of the other are imagined, held, and ‘animated’ through the panels and gutters of the page. In turn, comics scholars have emphasized 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.<sup>1</sup>

A similar approach is brought to bear on Safdar Ahmed’s 2015 online comic, *Villawood: Notes From An Immigration Detention Centre*, a work that seeks to bring awareness to Australia’s immigration policies, and lived experiences of indefinite detention.<sup>2</sup> In *Villawood*, Safdar Ahmed includes not only his drawings as a visitor to Villawood, the eponymous detention centre in Sydney, New South Wales, but those made by the asylum seekers themselves to offer a vitalizing form of testimony, traces, and memories from the ‘exclusion zone’. As Ahmed states, the comic is not a “comprehensive, monological account of what happens in detention, but attempts to show some of the common, everyday hardships related by those I’ve met, and the ways people assert their agency and resistance”.<sup>3</sup>

Influenced by Joe Sacco and Sam Wallman, both known for their work in comics journalism,

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<sup>1</sup> Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Jeff Adams, *Documentary Graphic Novels and Social Realism* (Oxford & New York: Peter Lang, 2008); Elisabeth El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); Nina Mickwitz, *Documentary Comics: Graphic Truth-Telling in a Skeptical Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Safdar Ahmed, *Villawood: Notes From An Immigration Detention Centre*. *The Shipping News*. 5 March 2015. Accessed 20 May 2019. [medium.com/shipping-news/villawood-9698183e114c](https://medium.com/shipping-news/villawood-9698183e114c).

<sup>3</sup> Anthony N. Castle, “Interview with *Villawood* creator Safdar Ahmed” *Australian Comics Journal*, 4 December 2015. Accessed 18 February 2018. [australiancomicsjournal.com/wp/interview-with-villawood-creator-safdar-ahmed/](http://australiancomicsjournal.com/wp/interview-with-villawood-creator-safdar-ahmed/).

as well as Robert Crumb, and underground comix more generally, *Villawood* portrays the spaces of detention not only through Ahmed's story, but extends its visual lexicon by incorporating a range of drawings made by some of the detainees themselves.

Along with co-founders Bilquis Ghani and Omid Tofighian, Safdar Ahmed helped establish the Refugee Art Project in 2010, an organisation that holds regular workshops for individuals in the Villawood Detention Centre. The Project's aim is to "facilitate the art and self-expression of asylum seekers and refugees, which is then presented to the Australian public through our exhibitions and publications, in order to challenge and educate the wider community".<sup>4</sup> The images available on the site's gallery include a broad array of themes, rendered in watercolour, pen, ink, as well as "coffee paintings"—a technique developed by an Iraqi detainee (name unknown), who mixed instant coffee with water to form a kind of paint, and which has been passed on to other asylum seekers.<sup>5</sup> In *Villawood*, Ahmed incorporates sketches by detainees to create an intra-archive of communal memories and remembrance where readers can see the images drawn by the detainees who otherwise remain mostly unknown to the broader public.

The comic 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.<sup>6</sup> One of the detainees, Ahmad, depicts his experience of indefinite detention through a symbolic composition, alongside a smaller sketch (*Figure 1*).

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

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<sup>4</sup> Refugee Art Project. "About RAP". [therefugeeartproject.com/home/faqs/](http://therefugeeartproject.com/home/faqs/). Accessed 20 May 2019.

<sup>5</sup> "About RAP".

<sup>6</sup> "About RAP".

Figure 1: “Symbolic Composition”. Image provided courtesy of Safdar Ahmed, *Villawood: Notes from An Immigration Detention Centre*. Web Comic. Get Up! - *The Shipping News*. [medium.com/shipping-news](https://medium.com/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 an 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 rather 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 ‘lived’—speaks of the way in which traumatic events can be variably encoded in explicit and implicit memories, as they speak of a fractured relationship with, in this instance, indefinite detention while grappling with other traumata. The reader’s attention is thus caught between these two modes of representation asking them to hold broad and variable associations as they reflect on Ahmad’s life in detention.

In an Australian context, detainees are often faced with indefinite detention. Butler defines ‘indefinite detention’ as an “illegitimate exercise of power”, an operation that is “part of a broader tactic to neutralize the rule of law in the name of security”.<sup>7</sup> She continues that “[i]ndefinite detention’ does not signify an exceptional circumstance, but, rather, the means by which the exceptional becomes established as a naturalized norm”.<sup>8</sup> By conveying detainees’ words and pictures within a new setting, *Villawood* encourages readers to apprehend detention in its lived and experiential dimensions through its particular

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<sup>7</sup> *Precarious Life*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Precarious Life*, 67.

strategies of visual representation. Significantly, the comic also reproduces Ahmad's handwriting, with the caption noting that the latter would write "beautiful couplets on napkins in Urdu" (*Figure 2*).<sup>9</sup>

<INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>

Figure 2 'Couplets in Urdu'. Image provided courtesy of Safdar Ahmed, *Villawood: Notes from An Immigration Detention Centre*. Web Comic. Get Up! - *The Shipping News*. [medium.com/shipping-news](https://medium.com/shipping-news).

A translation of the couplet is provided, and the colouring and texture of the panel background invites the reader to stay with the image over a longer duration of time. Sadly, Ahmad's handwriting comes to act as a trace of his now belated presence; the comic goes on to describe the details of his death from a heart attack while in detention at the age of 26. The story captures his friends' outrage at his death – and the textual presence of Ahmad's poetry, drawings, and words speak against his erasure within the Australian detention system. By layering the space of comic with multiple accounts of community and commemoration, *Villawood* creates a literal frame of recognition that persists beyond his death.

The incorporation of images drawn by the asylum seekers as well as Ahmad's photograph, into a comic narrative, reminds the reader of the lives that have been lived, as well as lost, in Villawood and other detention centres by creating a narrative context against which details of their personhood can be examined. I suggest that the incorporation is not entirely complete and that this is a useful element; rather than foreclosing each of the detainee's stories, the traces of their experience may lead the reader to consider the trajectory

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<sup>9</sup> "About RAP".

of each life since the publication of the comic in 2015. This in turn prompts the question of how individuals and communities can grieve for lives that are not been recognized as such in mainstream legal and political domains, and emphasizes the urgent need for the ethical and humane treatment of all asylum seekers and refugees held in detention. The comic thus encourages readers to actively engage with the characters they meet within its narrative, encounter the lived experiences that make up the specificities of what it means to seek asylum, while promoting awareness for individuals held in Australian detention centres – and elsewhere. These conditions are supported by use of different visual registers within the same work, which instantiate a space for the work mourning to take place in between these alternate forms of record.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler identifies the potential for grief to activate political nexus, asking, '[w]ho counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?'.<sup>10</sup> Butler emphasizes the impact that loss may engender in terms of its transformative possibilities within individual and communal domains. This position is theorized via the notion 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'.<sup>11</sup> The claim for the centrality of grief to modern life 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'. The acknowledgement that individuals are changed—perhaps

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, Eds Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *The Work of Mourning*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001); Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

irrevocably—by the loss of an ‘other’ can allow different responses to loss to unfold, and help shape private and public discourses. Butler’s work frames mourning as a way forward, of introducing new (and, in some cases, recognising older) forms of relationship between individuals, communities and loss. This epistemological enquiry is framed via ‘cultural mourning’, with an emphasis on exploring the possibilities (rather than closing off) of loss. The recognition of loss in comics thereby offers a productive hermeneutic through which to apprehend minority voices in relation to history, place, and identity.

As the other Forum contributors have suggested, comics can (though not always) productively represent the plurality of lived experiences because they can rely on exploratory, experimental, symbolic and unorthodox modes of representation to raise readers’ awareness of social, political, and historical issues, and ontological approaches to these concerns. The plasticity of the comics form allows such narratives to enliven alternate ways of seeing, and in doing so, help denaturalize the operation of normative discourses that either wholly or partially elide marginalised subject positions. In this way, comics can generate empathy for the lives and experiences they represent, and this is especially significant for groups whose voices have traditionally been ignored, and who all too readily continue to be dismissed, such as women, refugees and asylum seekers, and individuals living with stigmatized physical and mental health conditions, among others.

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