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Constructing (Un)Welcome and (Il)Legal: Affective Mechanisms of B/ordering and Othering in Graphic Novels about Migration

ABSTRACT

This research studies the representation of migrants in graphic novels through the interdisciplinary lens of affect theory and bordertexture methodology. Considering the controversy surrounding border policies and the current anti-migrant populist sentiment, it is crucial to explore the emotional affects induced by visual and textual representations of welcome and unwelcome border-crossers. This paper questions binary opposition legal/illegal and welcome/unwelcome and examines how the graphic novels *Illegal*, *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees*, *Home*, *The Power of Welcome* deconstruct or reinforce these binaries and, in doing so, highlight the selectivity and multivalence of borders. The paper argues that this framing, rooted in a colonial legacy of ‘othering,’ reinforces a hierarchical worldview where borders function as both physical barriers and cultural constructs within complex bordertextures.

KEYWORDS

affect; borders; graphic novels; migration; refugees

1. Introduction: the cultural and affective landscapes of migration

In a recent decade marked by a cascade of wars, intense mobility, and various migration challenges, borders have emerged not only as political and legal institutions but also as powerful cultural imaginaries. Global shifts, including deglobalization and new security regimes, reflect a trend toward closed and/or militarized borders, which differentiate between privileged and non-privileged forms of mobility. These developments evoke strong cultural responses, influencing perceptions of migrants as either *welcome or unwelcome*. The terminology such as “migrants”, “expats”, “illegal aliens,” or “refugees” carries powerful symbolic weight and cultural connotations, reflecting social hierarchies, moral judgments, and contested notions of belonging. The terminology highlights opposite ends of a symbolic spectrum where “expats” connote privilege, mobility, and social acceptance, while “refugees” or “illegal aliens” signal marginalization, criminalization, and exclusion. Public perceptions of migrants are stratified, some

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are seen as more “deserving” than others (De Coninck, 2023, p. 582), which reinforces emotional hierarchies and symbolic borders.

Representations of migrants are woven into the textures of borders, revealing their affective dimensions. Given controversies over border policies and rising anti-migrant sentiment, it is essential to examine cultural representations of migrants and their impact on border discourse. A critical question arises: What role do cultural narratives about migration play in sociopolitical landscapes? Are they merely symbolic gestures with limited impact, do they have positive impact, or do they, paradoxically, reinforce the anxieties and divisions they seek to challenge?

Taking into account the various controversies within border policies and sociocultural discourses constructing migration, this paper aims to explore the affects created by visual and textual representations of welcome and unwelcome migrants. Rather than treating these categories as inherent qualities, the analysis understands them as socially and politically constructed through the interplay of state institutions, legal frameworks, media narratives, and public perceptions within a global migration regime. The four graphic novels *Illegal* by Eoin Colfer, *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* by Don Brown, *Home* by Julio Anta, and *The Power of Welcome: Real-life Refugee and Migrant Journeys* by Jusic et al., (2023) were selected as case studies because they articulate prevalent cultural narratives of displacement. The cultural narratives in these graphic novels seek to illuminate both the diversity of migrants’ experiences across European and American borders and the ways these experiences are perceived, shedding light on borders in all their complexities. Moreover, as suggested by their very titles, they reflect on the selective nature of borders and the unequal attitude toward migrants. The analysis focuses on recurring tendencies across the graphic novels, exploring how visual and textual elements construct borders, displacement, and migrants, how they reflect the selectivity of borders, how affective mechanisms shape these representations, and what implications they carry. The analysis of the novels provides an opportunity to question binary oppositions such as legal/illegal and welcome/unwelcome and to examine whether these texts reinforce or challenge these categories through their affective implications. This might shed light on how borders function both as physical barriers and as cultural constructs within the hegemonic nation-state paradigm.

The representation of welcome and unwelcome migrants in the graphic novels is approached through an interdisciplinary framework of affect theory and bordertextures methodology. The lens of bordertexturing enables the understanding of borders beyond their physical manifestation, conceptualizing them as phenomena “formed out of attributions, ideas, or bodily representations in their mutual interweavings and influences” and as “both material and immaterial formations of cultural production” (“Bordertextures/UniGR Center for Border Studies”). The mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion established by borders

– manifesting through the categories welcome/unwelcome, wanted/unwanted, and legal/illegal when considered within cultural contexts – are grounded in attitudes and emotions produced by the multivalence and selectivity of borders, revealing deep-seated affective and ideological structures that shape perceptions of belonging and mobility within bordertextures. By integrating affect theory which claims that all life is affective life: all behavior, thought, planning, wishing, doing (Nathanson, 2008, p. xx), the paper highlights the emotional mechanisms that sustain and potentially disrupt the binaries while examining how migrants and borders become interwoven within complex textures of cultural imagery, thereby offering new insights into the social, political, and cultural complexities of displacement narratives.

2. Navigating the divide: the role of borders and the media in shaping perceptions of migration

Welcome and unwelcome are not accidental responses but the very outcomes of selective border regimes, which demonstrate that borders operate not merely as legal or political lines but as affective and classificatory systems that classify migrants, determining who is granted passage and who is obstructed, contained, or rendered invisible. Numerous studies (Costello & Foster, 2022; Korte, 2021; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012; Schulze Wessel, 2016; van Houtum, 2021; Wille et al., 2023) have demonstrated that borders function as selective systems of classification, “sorting machines” (Costello & Foster, 2022, p. 79) unevenly distributing mobility and producing hierarchies of belonging. They classify mobility into desirable and undesirable (Wille et al., 2023, p. 9), dividing people into “border persons” (subject to controls) and “non-border persons” (largely unaffected) (Schulze Wessel, 2016, p. 52). As Schulze Wessel (2016) claims, “For some the border is not even visible, while for others it is a permanent presence” (p. 52). Borders not only target individuals rather than territories (p. 52), but they are also “polysemic and unequal” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012, p. 58) as they can harden and soften depending on context, privileging some groups while discriminating against others (Korte, 2021; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012). Wille Weber, and Fellner (2023) offer the term “multivalence” to define the contextual selectivity of borders, emphasizing how their “meanings and values” shift depending on context and person, while also stressing their regulatory, cultural, and symbolic functions, which generate order and inequality. Scholars often emphasize the unequal treatment of migrants, pointing to different degrees of welcome and unwelcomeness, and describe this inequality through terms such as transnational segregation (van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002, p. 134), the global inequality trap of paper borders (van Houtum & van Uden, 2022, p. 22), and a discriminative taxonomy based on national origin (van Houtum, 2021, p. 35), or even “global apartheid” as a dominant global climate of unwelcome, where

migrants are framed as threats and contained through walls, surveillance, and militarization (Benedicto et al., 2020, p. 5). Ultimately, such conceptualizations underline how borders regulate not only mobility but also the degrees of welcome and unwelcome that render certain migrants “legal” or “illegal” in both formal and symbolic senses.

The selectivity and multivalence of borders carry deep cultural and symbolic significance, shaping affective responses and legitimizing differentiated perceptions of migrants. Borders and border fortifications function as projections of collective anxieties and geopolitical imaginations. They materialise collective identities, induce processes of Othering, and legitimise exclusion in the name of security and purity (Almond, 2016; van Houtum, 2021). Several studies (De Coninck, 2023; Korte, 2021) demonstrate that migrant reception reveals a hierarchy of “deservingness,” where cultural familiarity and geopolitical narratives often outweigh humanitarian need, which exposes the deeply affective and ideological logic underlying border policies. For example, Kristina Korte, in “Filtering or Blocking Mobility?,” notes that the Hungarian fence built in 2015 at the Serbian border primarily targeted Syrian refugees (Korte, 2021, p. 50). Similarly, David De Coninck (2023), in “The Refugee Paradox During Wartime in Europe: How Ukrainian and Afghan Refugees Are (Not) Alike,” highlights that Ukrainian refugees displaced by the 2022 Russian invasion received widespread humanitarian support from Western countries, whereas Afghan refugees fleeing after the Taliban takeover in 2021 faced skepticism and negative reactions (p. 580). This contrast is explained by several factors: Ukrainians are viewed as culturally and ethnically closer to Western populations, believed to share similar values and aspirations, and their visibility in European cultural events such as sports championships and Eurovision promotes familiarity and solidarity. Afghans, in contrast, lack this visibility and are often perceived through a lens of ideological and cultural difference, with conservative values and Muslim faith fuelling prejudice and Islamophobic xenophobia (p. 582).

The media and cultural productions amplify the symbolic and selective power of borders, mediating public perceptions and affects within the socio-political discourse. Various studies demonstrate that media coverage of refugees shapes public attitudes, highlighting the active role of the media in promoting either welcoming or unwelcoming perceptions. Yet their influence remains controversial and sometimes paradoxical and heavily relies on affects created. There are studies (Bara & Tsakiris, 2024; Merolla et al., 2013; Savio Vammen & Kohl, 2022) which demonstrate that emotions play one of the major roles in doing borderwork and govern the unwanted migration or “evoke morally charged spatial geographies” (Savio Vammen & Kohl, 2022, p. 919). Merolla et al. (2013) demonstrated that language choices in the media such as the terms “*illegal*”, “*undocumented*”, or “*unauthorized*” serve as framing devices that influence

public sentiment on immigration. Some research (Eccarius-Kelly & Schaeffing, 2022; Keskin et al., 2020; McLoughlin, 2023) emphasizes that media, as active agents, can generate a positive impulse by producing more sympathetic coverage inducing empathy and solidarity. However, these studies suggest that the media can foster welcoming attitudes mainly in specific contexts – among children, culturally proximate groups (as in De Coninck’s study discussed above), or audiences whose political orientations align with the media’s framing. Conversely, numerous studies reveal that negative framing is more prevalent, with threat-based and alarmist reporting reinforcing fear and dehumanization, which in turn radicalize attitudes and fuel anti-immigrant sentiment (Agovino et al., 2022; Wenzel & Žerkowska-Balas, 2018). Overall, media representations of (im)migrants and refugees are ambivalent and context-dependent, their effects shaped by selective framing, audience interpretation, and broader socio-political conditions.

Yet the media is only a part of a broader cultural landscape. Contemporary cultural and artistic responses to refugee crises within Western discourse like literature, film, and visual art are largely framed by the humanitarian logic of liberal rhetoric, characterized by sympathetic portrayals and the absence of alarmist or threat-focused framing. As Hemelryk et al. (2019) note in their editorial to *Refugee Filmmaking*, “writers, artists and intellectuals are today engaged in a relentless effort to contradict xenophobic narratives and to expose and unpick their manipulation by right-wing politicians” (p. 6). Many cultural narratives portraying migration actively challenge dehumanizing policies and seek to affirm the dignity and humanity of migrants. This tendency is exemplified in the epigraph by Elie Wiesel that opens *Illegal* by Eoin Colfer and Andrew Donkin, which encapsulates the ethos of such cultural production:

You, who are so-called illegal aliens, must know that no human being is illegal. That is a contradiction in terms. Human beings can be beautiful or more beautiful. They can be fat or skinny. They can be right or wrong, but illegal? How can a human being be illegal? (2017, “Epigraph”)

This statement epitomizes a broader cultural ambition: to humanize migrants and restore their moral and emotional visibility in opposition to sociopolitical discourses that reduce people to illegality, threat, or otherness. In general, studies (Briciu, 2020; Eccarius-Kelly & Schaeffing, 2022) observe that narratives of displacement often adopt humanizing strategies like first-person testimony, co-created art, and refugee-centered literature, that foster empathy, solidarity, and recognition. However, some scholars (Behrman, 2016; Kot, 2025) highlight that audience reception crucially depends on whether the narratives depicting refugees are fictional or non-fictional. Within fictional narratives, the portrayal of refugees as either active agents or passive victims further shapes responses which range from critical solidarity to paternalistic charity. Whether through empathy,

solidarity, or charity, this cultural generosity creates a paradox: despite sustained efforts to evoke compassion through emotionally charged narratives of struggle and resilience, anti-migrant sentiment continues to intensify across various regions, and restrictive border policies persist.

Aiming to identify the roots of this paradox, and the limits of cultural interventions in transforming political and social realities, the following section examines how specific cultural narratives of migration are constructed and perceived to reveal the representational and affective dynamics underlying them.

3. Affect, emotional engagement, and graphic narratives: looking at the readers' responses

This section uses readers' response analysis to examine graphic narratives of migration as the sights of cultural production which generate affective response. It focuses on affects triggered and demonstrates that such narratives resonate emotionally with audiences predominantly portraying migrants and refugees in a positive and empathetic light. As Nathanson (2008, p. xiv) explains, drawing on Tomkins (2008), the terms "affect" or "innate affect" refer to a group of nine highly specific, unmodulated physiological reactions present from birth. The term "feeling" describes the awareness that an affect has been triggered. Emotion is understood as the intertwining of an activated affect with memories of previous experiences of that affect. Affect, recognized through bodily reactions and expressions, not only brings individual experiences into consciousness but also contributes to script formation – a cognitive process that organizes repeated emotional experiences into lasting interpretive frameworks (p. xxii). Viewed in this way, migration narratives are not isolated depictions of hardship or resilience but are embedded within broader cultural scripts that structure how migrants are perceived. Representations of displaced people in cultural narratives, seek to trigger affect generating empathy and reinforcing particular modes of understanding. In this sense, readers respond to visual and narrative cues such as facial expressions, bodily posture, and scenes/descriptions of vulnerability or endurance, which signal recognizable affects like surprise, interest, fear, distress, anger. These cues invite readers to mirror or internalize these affects, shaping their immediate emotional response and guiding interpretation. Nathanson (2008) notes that people are "wired to react innately to the expressed affect of others as if it were our own." However, he admits that "to live in a complex world with all its intense experiences requires that we practice variable susceptibility to the affect of others," a mechanism he calls an "empathic wall" (p. xvi).

The analysis of Goodreads reactions to four studied graphic novels *Illegal*, *Unwanted*, *Home*, and *The Power of Welcome* shows that the first three, depicting migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America as unwelcome in the EU and U.S., generated considerably more engagement than *The Power of*

Welcome, which emphasizes individual stories of arrival and inclusion. Readers tend to demonstrate strong emotional reactions in their reviews of the first three books, frequently expressing feelings of *sadness, empathy, and frustration*. The responses describe the novels as heartbreaking, eye-opening, and depressing, while also noting the hope and resilience of the protagonists. The most recurrent keywords include *struggle, desperation, survival, journey, loss, hope, injustice, and inhumanity*, which reflects both the emotional intensity of the narratives and their emphasis on the perilous quest for a better life.

This pattern of audience engagement reflects the intentions articulated by some authors. Julio Anta (2022), in his author's note, writes:

My intention with this story was to expose readers to the real horrors migrants experience at the hands of our government, albeit with a superhuman bent. Anna¹ did an incredible job bringing this bleak environment to life, particularly the icebox. She was also able to translate the helplessness and terror Juan and his mother experienced when they began learning the truth about family separation in a way I couldn't even imagine while writing a script. (n. p.)

Readers' reactions to *The Power of Welcome*, though fewer, emphasized themes of hope, loss, war, welcome, and safety. All together the responses illustrate that reading functions as a distinctive form of social interaction, one that engages audiences in a dialogue with the narrative and mediates between diverse perspectives and values, thereby generating affective resonance. It is affective resonance through which, according to Tomkins and Nathanson, people know about the inner experiences of others (Nathanson, 2008. p. xvi).

These patterns in reader responses point to broader processes through which affect becomes structured and interpreted within public discourse through emotional scripts. As Seigworth and Gregg (2010) note in *The Affect Theory Reader*, affects influence not only feelings but also the relational and physical forces that shape behavior, ideas, and experience (p. 2), sparking and fading in ways that transmit the influence of the surrounding social environment (p. 6). Emotional scripts, therefore, operate as a powerful mechanism for shaping public perception of migration and they reinforce or challenge established social and political boundaries.

Building on this theoretical framework, the following sections turn to the analysis of the four graphic novels. The focus lies on how visual and textual strategies construct representations of displacement, migrants, and borders. Given the scope of this paper, the analysis focuses on shared tendencies across analysed graphic novels, especially those that highlight affect and its implications. The analysis considers how these representations elicit affects, what implications they

¹ Anna Wieszczyk is comic book artist and illustrator from Poland; co-creator of the graphic novel *Home*.

hold for the inclusion/exclusion binaries underlying welcoming or unwelcoming attitudes and how they promote or eliminate the symbolic function and selectivity of the border.

4. Constructing displacement

As evident from the previous section, narratives that frame migrants and refugees as *unwanted*, *unwelcome*, or *illegal* tend to produce the most emotionally charged portrayals. Unlike narratives emphasizing inclusion or welcome, they highlight danger, vulnerability, and suffering and shape audience perception through heightened affect rather than nuanced social realities. This tendency, however, is not uniform across all cultural texts. The degree to which emotional intensity translates into oversimplification often depends on the narrative's relationship to real experience and the positionality of its author (Kot, 2025, p. 57). Thus, the affective charge and ethical framing of migration stories usually vary according to whether the text emerges from direct testimony or from the author's interpretive reconstruction of others' experiences. It is important to note that while *The Power of Welcome: Real-life Refugee and Migrant Journeys*, as indicated by its title, engages with real-life events, the other three works primarily reflect the authors' interpretations of migration stories or compilations of experiences. Julio Anta, for example, explains that, as the son and grandson of Cuban and Colombian migrants, was horrified in 2018 by the Trump administration's family separation policy. Don Brown dedicates *Unwanted* to Syrian refugees whose stories heavily inform the narrative, whereas the authors of *Illegal* acknowledge that their story is fictional, though every element is drawn from reality.

Building on this distinction between first-hand and mediated accounts, we can observe how representation itself becomes an affective mechanism of inclusion or exclusion. The sense of being unwelcome is not only emphasized as a focal point in *Illegal*, *The Unwanted*, and *Home*, but is also conveyed through the intense precarity of journeys migrants must undertake. These journeys are frequently depicted as endless, exhausting, and dangerous treks across different times, spaces, and borders. In contrast, *The Power of Welcome* portrays refugees in more privileged, contemporary circumstances, travelling by flights, trains, and through urban settings, which aligns with a socially acceptable and modern image of migrants. These depictions might frame societal approval or warmth toward those perceived as more similar to "us," and vice versa alienation toward those marked as distant, threatening, or culturally "other." In this way, the contrast between "welcome" and "unwelcome" refugees exposes the affective hierarchies, revealing how narratives of mobility often mirror broader structures of inclusion and exclusion.

Although fictional narratives often draw on real experiences, those portraying "unwelcome" migrants tend to overaccumulate and sensationalize precarious

details that an “outside gaze” can capture, reducing complex realities into digestible, formulaic narratives of crisis. The analysed novels focusing on unwelcome migrants resemble adventure novels, detached from the realities with which readers can identify. This disconnect arises not only because readers often lack direct experience of migration, but also because these narratives, like adventure tales, detach events from historical, biological, or biographical sequences. They rely on what Bakhtin (1981) calls “adventurous time,” fragmented into short, intense episodes marked by coincidences and chance events, where normal causality is suspended and the plot advances through sudden turns such as “at just that moment” or “suddenly” (p. 92). In *Illegal*, *The Unwanted*, and *Home*, each stage of the recursive journey is depicted as highly risky, involving threats such as Mediterranean crossings, rooftop travel, desert treks, or movement through conflict zones, villains such as smugglers, human traffickers. Refugees are facing constant loss and mortal danger, e.g. death at sea or in the desert, mothers losing children. As fictional representations of real events, these clustered misadventures transform refugee experiences into dramatic clichés, producing the “spectacle of suffering” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 1) that may function as “poverty porn” (Lenette & Cleland, 2016, p. 78) for Western audiences, invoking the notion of “rescue.” In this way, the lived experiences of displaced people are often reduced to familiar visual clichés and narrative tropes like “massification, vilification, infantilisation, marginalisation or aestheticisation,” which function as “symbolic strategies of dehumanisation” (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017, p. 1173). Analysed graphic novels also rely on those tropes depicting migrants as masses, one-dimensional and faceless or overly dramatized, perpetuating what Barthes (1957/1991) described as the myth of the “eternal essences of refugees, which it is in the nature of the East to produce” (pp. 95–96). This, he argues, “denies any identification by History”, presenting migrants as timeless, passive figures whose experiences are detached from political and historical contexts

The accumulation of precarious details, especially through visual representations, functions as a form of sensory bombardment designed to elicit affective resonance. In *Illegal*, the depiction of crowds desperately trying to survive as a ship capsizes amplifies the chaos and panic when hundreds of people are flailing in the water. The sense of fear and helplessness is intensified by their lack of agency, creating a scene of overwhelming desperation. At the same time, the tragedy takes on a voyeuristic dimension as a spectacle designed for the reader’s emotional engagement. As studies have shown, the “spectacle” of “crisis” often operates between evoking empathetic concern (Bal, 2022; Bara & Tsakiris, 2024; Briciu, 2020; Robinson, 2019) and stimulating voyeuristic responses (Ibrahim & Howarth, 2016; Stepnitz, 2018). In *Illegal*, the catastrophe is depicted with such visual and narrative intensity that it draws readers into the horror while positioning them as distant observers, safe from the suffering they

witness. This dual perspective generates a complex affective response: readers may experience sympathy for those depicted, yet also an awareness of their own detachment, which can create emotional distance and diminish their sense of responsibility. As Schimanski (2024) argues, the temporality of the spectacle of crisis constitutes a media event that unites audiences in a shared moment of national or global attention, yet obscures the slower, structural temporalities of migration (p. 23). In this sense, the migrant journey is not only dramatized as a spectacle of suffering but also folded into a broader logic that privileges immediacy, visibility, and emotional intensity over historical or systemic understanding. Displacement is thus transformed into a universalized spectacle of endurance and loss that seeks pity rather than understanding. By privileging sentiment over analysis, such narratives translate systemic injustice into individualized feelings of compassion or pity which might comfort the reader-spectator but fail to challenge the structures producing displacement in the first place. Thus, they risk reproducing the very logic they aim to expose. They sustain an affective economy in which responsibility is replaced by emotional consumption. Moreover, the constant sensationalisation leads to this formulaic coverage of tragedies which can both escalate demands for trauma while also produce the numbing effect which Susan Moeller (2022) calls “compassion fatigue” (p. 2).

The narratives depicting “unwanted” and “illegal” refugees often rely on the trope of the “promised land,” a place where, as shown in *Illegal and Unwanted*, migrants believe they have “the greatest chance to be welcomed and allowed to work (Brown, 2018, p. 35).” Such portrayals reinforce the misconception of migration as a journey toward a guaranteed better life and Europe as an “asylum paradise,” a notion that has since been co-opted by populist discourses to criticize this perception. In *Illegal and Unwanted*, Western Europe is idealized as embodying migrants’ aspirational yet naïve hopes, encouraging readers to see migration as a personal story of tragedy and survival with emotional closure when the destination is reached. It displaces attention from broader struggles migrants deal with both on the way and upon arrival: discrimination, precarity, lack of legal recognition, and the enduring trauma of displacement. In this sense, *The Power of Welcome* offers a more balanced representation of refugee life in host countries by shifting the focus from the journey itself to post-arrival realities, including stereotyping, hostility, depression, and economic hardship as well as moments of support and connection. Rather than framing refugees primarily through trauma or physical struggle, the book explores the affective dimensions of migration: separation, nostalgia, and the pain of leaving one’s home. Significantly, even those characters who fall into the category of the “welcomed” and enjoy relative privilege: dual citizenship, safe passage, or pre-existing social ties with the host country are depicted as experiencing deep affective displacement. This nuanced portrayal challenges one-size-fits-all narratives of refugee experience and

highlights the complexity of belonging and emotional adaptation in the context of forced migration.

5. Constructing an un/welcome migrant

If we further examine how un/welcome is framed in the four analysed graphic novels, we notice the same (if not more striking) contrast between representation of welcoming attitudes and experiences of being unwelcome as discussed in the previous section. The struggles of “unwelcome” migrants are conveyed through images of fear and despair depicting them as victims fleeing violence and danger, confined in hostile environments marked by darkness and discomfort which reinforces a sense of victimization. *Unwanted* repeatedly depicts exploitation, with children working for meager wages, denied education, and living in parks or makeshift camps. An image of a desperate mother with her children standing in the middle of the street, isolated and silently judged by bystanders, an evocative trope of alienation and societal indifference (*Brown, 2018, p. 45*). In *Illegal*, migration is portrayed as acute vulnerability, with migrants entirely dependent on ruthless smugglers who control access to basic needs. *Home* follows a similar pattern, juxtaposing hostile border officials with desperate migrants and highlighting the contrast between power and victimization. While this juxtaposition aims to reveal the border’s selective and dehumanizing logic, it simultaneously risks reducing migrants to tropes instead of seeing them as individuals with voices, agency, and personal complex histories. Viewed through the prism of affect theory, such narratives of displacement rely on the emotional intensity of victimization to engage the reader. They aim at inviting and amplifying feelings of compassion². This prosocial emotion, as evolutionary theorists argue, is inherently rewarding³ because it sustains social bonding and cooperative behaviour. According to Goetz et al. (2010), compassion mechanisms depend on three main factors: how relevant the sufferer seems to us, whether they are seen as responsible for what happened to them, and whether they appear able to cope with their situation (p. 7).

² Compassion, sympathy, and pity are distinct yet related emotions that arise in response to another’s suffering. According to Goetz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas (2010), compassion is “an affective state defined by a specific subjective feeling that arises when witnessing another’s suffering and motivates a desire to help” (p. 2). The researchers distinguish compassion from empathy, which entails internally mirroring or resonating with another’s emotional experience. Both affective states belong to an interconnected family of emotional responses. They are also related to sympathy, which involves emotional concern and sorrow for another’s suffering but does not necessarily entail a prosocial motivation, and to pity, which often carries a sense of superiority or condescension toward the sufferer (pp. 2–3).

³ From an evolutionary perspective, compassion is rewarding because it increased survival and reproductive success by promoting care for vulnerable offspring, enhancing attractiveness in mate selection, and fostering cooperative bonds with non-kin (Goetz et al., 2010, p. 4). In general humans are motivated to maximize positive affects (Nathanson, 2008, p. xx;)

As an indicator of deservingness is the extent to which the sufferer is seen as responsible for their own suffering. When migrants are represented as entirely blameless, dependent, and powerless, compassion aimed to be maximized; when they are seen as responsible for their choices or capable of resistance, it may diminish. Thus, while compassion is effectively mobilized through portrayals of vulnerability, the full complexity of migrants' strategies, risks, and moral choices is frequently blurred allowing emotional resonance to remain strong at the cost of nuanced understanding.

Another problem, with such sentimentalized depictions, which concentrate excessively on trauma, is that although they may effectively evoke sympathy and moral urgency, their focus on victimhood tends to elicit pity rather than compassion. While precarity is indeed central to the lived realities of many displaced people, these depictions reduce them to mere symbols of suffering, "beggars," victims of circumstances, or objects of rescue as they frequently portrayed in *Unwanted* and *Illegal* and *Home*. This reflects a charitable, paternalistic gaze which positions migrants as passive recipients of aid and enforce a world in which, as Szörényi (2006) notes, those on display in whose name the images are made are voiceless. They are expected only to be looked at, objectified, and ultimately obscured in the name of producing global truths by those in power who define the narrative (p. 29). The inability of "illegal" and "unwanted" migrants to control these narratives leaves them symbolically silenced, stripped of the capacity to narrate and reclaim their own experiences.

Migrants, in the analysed graphic novels which focus on unwelcomed migrants, are often coded as uneducated, poor, and vulnerable. For example, the graphic novels *Illegal* and *Unwanted* depicts primarily "Third World-looking people"⁴ in settings that look timeless, backward, and incapable of progress, perpetuating Orientalist tropes. Such portrayals tend to strip migrants of individuality and cultural specificity and turn migrants into a neo-embodiment of Said's Orient, "produced by the nature of the East" (Barthes, 1957/1991, p. 95), which "helped to define Europe (or the West)" (Said, 1978, p. 1). Unwanted and unwelcome migrants are thus constructed as exotic, inferior, powerless, and unchanging, an image contrasted with that of someone from the West. What makes such depictions even more problematic is that these recursive visual clichés and narrative tropes function as frames of recognition. These frames, according to Butler (2009), enable certain images and "operate to produce certain subjects as

⁴ Ghassan Hage in his book *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* uses the term "Third World-looking people" to describe how Western, or "First World," societies construct racialized others as visual symbols of poverty, backwardness, and cultural inferiority within their own imaginary of superiority (Hage 1998, p. 58 as cited in Szörényi, 2006, p. 28).

‘recognizable’ persons and to make others decidedly more difficult to recognize” (p. 6). As Anna Szörényi (2006) rightly observes: “there is the assumption that there is indeed a kind of person that can be called a refugee, and that this person thinks and feels in a particular way. Second, that ‘these people’ are ‘all victims’. Third, that the discourse through which this problem should be addressed is that of human rights. And finally, that in spite of the myriad political, historical and personal trajectories involved in displacement from different locations around the globe, the state of being a refugee can be characterised by a standard narrative form: persecution, flight, exile, and finally rescue and resettlement” (p. 6). These representational norms then help determine, for instance, whether asylum seekers are recognized as people whose lives are understood as “grievable” and worthy of compassion (Bleiker et al., 2013, p. 400). The outcome is that, despite their claimed humanitarian intentions, books like the novels analysed often appear more focused on reinforcing, rather than questioning selectivity of borders. It means that refugees and (im)migrants might be considered deserving of help when they align with certain expectations (e.g., impoverished or helpless), but less deserving when they challenge those expectations.

Moreover, affect studies also show that people experience stronger compassion and are more likely to help those who are similar to them in values, preferences, or physical characteristics (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, as cited in Goetz et al. 2010, p. 8). By lacking depth and failing to reference the true identities and experiences of real people to whom readers can relate, the analysed narratives may contribute to the construction of an empathic wall, the abovementioned variable susceptibility to the affect of others. The focus on extreme tragedy, especially when depicted through stark, emotional visuals of suffering like in the discussed novels, can still maintain distance, where the audience is invited to feel sympathy but not necessarily to relate. According to studies (Batson, 1991; Nussbaum, 1996 as cited in Goetz et al., 2023; Sontag, 2003) compassion maintains a crucial self–other distinction as it involves recognizing that “the bad lot of the sufferer...is, right now, not one’s own” (Nussbaum, 1996, p. 35, as cited in Goetz et al. 2010, p. 8). The image of the dislocated and suffering person can be used to bolster the subjectivity of the privileged viewer, “voyeuristic lure” (Sontag, 2003, p. 99). A distant, sanitized view of refugee hardships (Lenette & Cleland, 2016, p. 78), as embodied in such narratives, reinforces the border itself by strengthening the “us/them” dichotomy, positioning refugees as the “other”, who, in their visibility, are objectified for the consumption of the Western viewer (Mannik, 2012, p. 274) within the hegemonic nation-state paradigm because, as Mannik (2012) claims, visual representations of refugees provide another way nations are imagined through the juxtaposition of images of “others” (p. 272). This leads viewers to separate their own non-refugee experiences from the precarious misadventures occurring far beyond the border, evoking possible emotional responses but little meaningful engagement.

In contrast, *The Power of Welcome* seeks to make migrants more relatable to the audience by shaping the images through emotions of belonging, resilience, and quiet struggle rather than victimhood or desperation. The book employs semiotic strategies that challenge traditional portrayals of refugees as suffering, displaced individuals. Instead, it situates them within contemporary, recognizable spaces. We see in these graphic narratives urban settings, modern transportation such as flights and trains, and everyday activities like taking photos, painting, or cycling both before displacement and in host countries, which emphasises their presence within a shared global present. The visual and narrative cues reject exoticism and orientalism. For example, cities like Damascus are portrayed not as distant, chaotic, or trapped in the past but as modern, vibrant spaces filled with cinemas, restaurants, and ordinary life.

This normalization of refugee spaces and experiences is reinforced through individual stories that emphasize agency and emotional depth. For instance, the Ukrainian family is shown carefully planning their journey, debating whether to leave, which manifests rationality and self-determination rather than passivity. Similarly, Afghan protagonist's decision to flee Kabul during the Taliban's advance is depicted not through sensationalised images of destruction but through the intimate, painful process of departure: packing belongings, saying goodbye, and acknowledging the emotional weight of leaving loved ones behind. Acts of kindness, such as a mechanic fixing a refugee's bike for free, symbolise humanising and reciprocal relationships between refugees and host communities. The emphasis on emotional loss over physical hardship signals a shift in refugee narratives, which frames displacement as complex, nuanced transitions. Unlike narratives that emphasize suffering and hardship reinforcing borders by framing refugees as perpetual "others" in need of rescue, a more nuanced depiction, such as that in *The Power of Welcome*, seeks to dismantle symbolic borders and stress a sense of shared humanity.

6. Constructing the Border

The multivalence of borders is evident in migration narratives, which not only show the selectivity of borders but also extend it into the cultural imaginaries of bordertextures. Comparing narratives of "welcome" and "unwelcome" migrants, it becomes clear that the border is strongly emphasized as the main antagonist in the latter, while being almost invisible in the former, which devotes little attention to border crossing and the journey. In the narratives portraying unwelcome migration, like *Illegal*, *Unwanted*, and *Home*, borders are depicted as strong, limiting forces that block access to safety and frequently lead to painful, life-or-death situations. This dramatization reveals the selectivity of the border itself and affective intensity of representations that borders generate. As Nathanson (2008) observes, "affect always makes good things better and bad things worse"

(p. xviii). Armed guards, barbed wire, and hostile environments reinforce the image of refugees as victims unjustly shut out from sanctuary. The restrictive nature of borders, the harsh behaviour of border guards, structural inequities, and bureaucratic obstacles are strongly emphasized, shaping representations of displaced people through threats and anxieties. These emotions define the borders in these narratives, which further amplifies the symbolic and affective dimensions connected with migrant representations. While these portrayals of border injustice aim to generate empathy through affective resonance and can mobilize short-term support, they also reinforce the selectivity of borders. By presenting borders exclusively as impenetrable, militarized zones, fictional narratives may distance readers from the experiences of unwelcome migrants, separating their own secure lives from the precarious misadventures at the border. Moreover, the binary of “good” refugees versus “bad” border guards leaves little room for nuanced discussions of migration management, humanitarian concerns, and national security. When such complexities are absent from public discourse, suppressed questions become tools for political manipulation.

In contrast, *The Power of Welcome* visualizes a “First World” cultural imaginary, with flights and urban settings replacing militarized borders and portraying a welcoming reception. It focuses on the lost home, the desire for homecoming, and the everyday struggles of displaced people. These stories convey the emotional complexity of displacement and resist overly sentimental portrayals. They acknowledge, that displacement is a permanent, liminal condition. Borders here are presented not just as physical obstacles but rather as continuous, shaping forces that structure life between lost and found homes.

Although neither of the discussed novels can fully capture the diverse causes and experiences of displacement, the representations of migrants constructed through them reveal how the selectivity of borders is culturally constructed and mediated through both affective and symbolic frameworks. Overall, both the narratives portraying “unwelcome” and “welcome” migrants construct emotional frameworks that shape the affective dimensions of bordertextures. While the former emphasize suffering and precarity, activating moral hierarchies and emotional distance, the latter employ normalization and relatability to bridge the gap. Yet even compassionate depictions remain entangled in hierarchies of perception, where empathy often reinforces rather than dissolves asymmetries of power. The difficult circumstances of “unwelcomed” or “illegal” refugees frequently result in their depiction as victims, reducing their experiences to states of passivity and loss. A more nuanced depiction reveals, however, that moments of agency, resilience, and adaptation coexist with vulnerability, complicating the binary of victimhood and empowerment. Through these layered portrayals, such narratives expose the complex emotional economies that structure belonging, recognition, and exclusion.

7. Conclusion: reflections on migration, borders, cultural representations, and affects

The contemporary geopolitical context has intensified global migration to unprecedented levels, which generates challenges that often fuel anti-migrant sentiment. Migrants experience uneven treatment at borders and within host societies: some are met with recognition, solidarity, and inclusion, while others face exclusion, prosecution, and surveillance. Public responses to migration, which reveal the selectivity of the border, are shaped by cultural proximity, political alignment, and dominant media frames that determine which categories of migrants are welcome and which are marginalized, often employing the power of affect and emotion. Unlike ambivalent socio-political discourses, cultural representations of migration seek to evoke compassion and empathy. Yet, despite such intentions, anti-migrant attitudes persist, provoking critical reflection on the actual impact of these affective portrayals.

This article suggests that borders function as affective and symbolic constructs entangled with emotion, security, and hierarchy, forming complex bordertextures in which cultural narratives play an indispensable role. The gap between the ethical intention of these narratives and their limited transformative effect lies in the representational fallacies embedded within them. Even when motivated by empathy, such representations often rely on simplification and stereotyping, amplifying certain experiences while silencing others. Borders, both material and symbolic, mediate these representations: rather than subverting exclusion, cultural narratives can reinforce it by shaping emotions, perceptions, and notions of “deservingness.” Simplified representations frequently portray migrants solely as victims, avoiding the moral and political complexities of displacement. By emphasizing desperation and suffering, depictions of “unwelcomed” or “illegal” migrants tend to evoke pity rather than compassion, strengthening a paternalistic gaze that blurs agency and the structural dynamics of migration.

Affective resonance, the emotional intensity with which audiences internalize migration narratives, is therefore ambivalent, as the very narratives designed to provoke sympathy may inadvertently strengthen perceptions of migrants as alien, illegal, and “othered,” thus building an empathic wall. When migrants are depicted through a trope of “passive sufferers”, they risk reaffirming exclusionary logics. Drawing on Berlant’s understanding of affect, Figlerowicz (2012) argues that affect theory is valuable precisely because it resists a strict separation between intentional and non-intentional forms of experience (p. 13). More nuanced portrayals, attentive to ambivalence, agency, and contradiction, can potentially challenge these emotional and symbolic hierarchies by presenting migrants as fully human, complex, self-determining, and embedded in larger political contexts. Understanding the affective, symbolic, and structural dimensions of these narratives is therefore crucial not only for cultural analysis but also for

reimagining borders themselves and countering the emotional mechanisms that sustain othering and exclusion.

Announcements

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