Chapter 15. Intolerable Fictions: Composing Refugee Realities in Comics

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Introduction: Rethinking Refugee Comics

What is the purpose and power of comics that tell refugee stories? How do they advance the rights of the refugee? To begin answering these questions, I hope the reader will forgive a brief citation of my own words as a point of departure. First drafted some years ago now, I reproduce them here because I think they summarise quite typical and widely accepted critical opinions:

> As the photographic image circulates with increased speed, its authenticity undermined by the editing capabilities of software such as Photoshop, the laboured depiction of an event in comics form – which, by definition, contextualises each image alongside others within its sequential-narrative structure – is becoming increasingly popular. Comics slow down a visual culture of proliferating decontextualised images of violence and suffering, the drawn image disrupting the photographic reality to which viewers have become accustomed. (Davies 2020a, 182.)

It is fair to say that, on a first reading at least, these sentences seem pretty uncontroversial. I would certainly not claim them as original. They make the case for the power and purpose of refugee comics by situating them in and against the wider context of our digitised visual culture. They suggest the measured slowness of comics – Sacco's "slow journalism" – as an effective aesthetic and political tool with which to hail readerly attention in the midst of a catastrophe of scrolling images and ceaseless media streams. They assume a description of photography as an ephemeral, unreliable medium that has been spectacularised into postmodern redundancy by the rise of 24-hour news channels and the internet. Informed by the work of Jean Baudrillard (1995, 2000), the implication here is that "the real" has been eclipsed into non-existence by the over-saturation of photographic information, be it about refugees or distant war zones or conflicts or famines. Against this backdrop, it is posited that the more analogue – and by implication, the more "authentic" – medium of comics can *draw* the real back into view, not only figuratively, but literally too.

While there probably remains some truth to this assessment, in this chapter I want to argue for a different way of conceptualising the important work that refugee comics do. Rather than emphasising comics as a *medium* that is somehow antidotal to the prevailing photographic and filmic streams of our hyper-visual media culture, I want instead to shift our attention to their *composition*, and more particularly to the work they do to reconfigure the dominant relationship between image and text. To grasp the full force of this shift, we must unsettle two common misconceptions that are implied by the brief quotation above. First is the notion that, in our digitised visual culture, there are "too many images" of refugees specifically, and of war and displaced people generally. Against this assumption, I want to argue that there are *not* "too many" of these images, that in fact there are a dearth of them. But there *are* too many images of unnamed refugees, too many photographs of people contained within the frame and subject to the camera's gaze, yet deprived of access to accompanying explanatory or self-identifying text.

The second and related misconception that I argue we might reconsider is the idea that the veracity and verifiable "truth" of the *photographic* image is in question, and that its political impact has therefore been diminished. Rather than despairing with postmodernists that the "sign" of the photograph has now utterly fragmented away from the reality it signifies, we might be better served by questioning whether the underlying premise of this notion – which assumes that there *should* be a direct line between the singular photograph or image of the refugee, on the one hand, and empathetic feeling or political action on the part of the viewer, on the other – is all that helpful in the first place. As I suggest, by beginning with the assumption that this solicitation of empathy or action is the singular purpose of any such image, whether graphic or photographic, we have already shaped the way we read and receive it, by implication foreclosing more expansive ways in which we read, think, and teach with refugee comics.

Underpinning both of these frequently held assumptions is a deeper and, I believe, misleadingly rigid distinction between the way we read the compositional strategies employed by fiction and non-fiction comics. That we have drawn generic dividing lines between, say, graphic novels, on the one hand, and non-fiction or documentary comics, on the other, is entirely understandable, given not only our political investments but also the more practical limitations of our disciplinary expertise. For these reasons, too, it has made sense for us to approach each genre with different readerly assumptions and, subsequently, different critical

methods and analytical frames. But I want to suggest in this chapter that it might be equally helpful to read refugee comics in a way that does not restrict its analysis of their compositional elements as so many efforts to stage a kind of documentary "veracity", or to perform a journalistic "authenticity" – even as many refugee comics do indeed employ their visual rhetoric to such an end, consciously at least. By way of provocation, I want to ask instead that we consider the power of comics' *fictional* elements, by which I mean their folding of "witness" statements and "authentic" testimonies into a larger narrative and fictional whole, though one that is no less "true" for its fictionality. As I will argue here, by worrying less about the performative authenticity of the images themselves and focusing instead on the way in which those images are arranged alongside accompanying text into compelling narratives (whether objectively "true" or otherwise), we can open up a different set of considerations and inquiries into how more purposeful and more powerful refugee stories might be told.

To be clear, I intend this as a counteractive shift of emphasis that might expand the critical conversation; I am not arguing for some sudden and decisive departure from the excellent criticism that already exists. To make my case, the remainder of this chapter is split into three short sections. In the first, I highlight some of the major trends in this existing criticism. In the second, I suggest a different way of thinking about the power and purpose of refugee comics by drawing on the work of Susan Sontag and Jacques Rancière. And in the third, I show how this works in practice with a brief discussion of Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock's long form comic, *Vanni, A Family's Struggle Through the Sri Lankan Conflict* (2019). Taken together, I intend these discussions to contribute to the broader aims of this collection by asking how academics and readers make practical use of refugee comics in initiating reflective conversations about different kinds of refugee representation – something to which I believe we scholars of comics should be committed, not only in the pages of written research, but in the classrooms and community spaces in which we might be fortunate enough to discuss and teach with refugee comics as well.

The Authenticity Illusion

Much criticism written on the representation of refugees in comics over the last decade or so has, understandably, focused on just that: the documentary representation of the refugee. On the one hand, and taking a rather disproportionate cue from Joe Sacco, these studies have

explored how comics "slow down" the stream of images of conflict and migration that is said to overwhelm our televisions, laptops, and smartphones. On the other, a sustained critical interest has also been paid to the ways in which graphic narratives, with their explicitly documentarian visual grammar, invite readers to scrutinise the veracity of refugee stories through a series of meta-representational cues. Taken together, these two dominant threads of criticism emphasise comics as a refreshing visual antidote to the flood of photographic images that, in their overwhelming proliferation, have on the one hand been rendered banal and ineffective, or on the other (and there is more than a little contradiction here) misleading and untrustworthy. The broad assumption that the main purpose of a comic should be to establish a direct line between the reader's reading of the story and their subsequent taking of political action does not go unquestioned in this work, but it does continue to frame much contemporary discussion of refugee comics.

Let me offer a brief overview of just some notable interventions in the field. In her discussion of "crisis comics", life writing scholar Sidonie Smith suggests that such comics address their readers "as privileged, safe subjects to be enlightened about conditions elsewhere, and their reading rehearses a form of rescue of the other through the invitation to empathetic identification and outrage" (2011, 64). As she continues, the genre should therefore be thought of "as social action, contributing to the 'social work' of publicising rights discourse, distributing rights identities, and interpellating the reader as a subject of rights activism" (64). Smith herself problematises this direct line of interpellation, noting that this kind of "rescue reading" is evaded by some graphic memoirs (she lists *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *Fun Home* as examples), which instead begin to increase the "visual literacy of global publics" (68) and mark the kind of shift in critical emphasis that I am arguing for here. Advancing a similar point, Candida Rifkind is also critical of the way in which comics "perpetuate the management of 'empathetic identification' within neoliberal discourses of human rights", but she maintains that the main purpose and power of such comics is "to intervene in the photographic regime of the migrant as Other" (2017, 649). For Nina Mickwitz, the fact that "the production process of comics is itself slow compared with the speed and immediacy that motivates the 24-hour news culture" means that "the retrospective accounts they produce correspond more closely with documentary journalism than they do with news journalism" (2016, 146). For Katalin Orbán, too, documentary comics find themselves "at the slower end of a faster discourse" when "contrasted to the 24-hour news cycle and the time and scope of the Twitter model of instant encapsulation" (2015, 124). As Mickwitz concludes, comics

images therefore most simply "offer a representation of that which is absent, and potentially extend the possibility of a similar kind of secondary witnessing" (2016, 63).

Writing specifically of refugee comics, Kathy Burrell and Katherine Hörschelmann continue this point. As they argue, such graphic narratives "actively nurture an empathetic, compassionate and imaginative engagement from the viewer/reader, and how they depict and challenge the othered position of […] refugees, in Europe" (2019, 51). Julika Bake and Michaela Zöhrer, similarly interested in comics in the "context of humanitarian witnessing", take a social constructionist perspective on the documentary genre to show how "signifiers of truthfulness are formed by and at the same time guide media and genre conventions and overarching techniques that the audience (and the author) expects a non-fiction text to relate to in order to signify 'realism'" (2017, 85). But they make this point less to suggest a renewed interest in the narrative composition of refugee stories, and more to highlight the way in which they make an "authenticity" claim (e.g., Sacco's "visibility does not get in the way of representing the truth [but rather] adds [to the] *authenticity claims* of a representation)" (94–95, my emphasis). Similarly, Julia Ludewig – in her attempt to discern the "something else" that comics bring to refugee stories – identifies the power that resides "not necessarily [in comics'] fictionality, but [in their] narrativisation and artistic reshaping of the facts", and she retains an emphasis on the importance of the "mimetic mode [that] *authenticates* the reportage as truthful" (2019, 25, 30, my emphasis). Finally, Wibke Weber and Hans-Martin Rall trace the rise of documentary comics back to the strategies of the New Journalism movement in the 1970s and '80s, attributing comics' power and success to what they describe as the "*authenticity illusion*" (2017, 381).

The criticism addressed in these two paragraphs is only a small sample of the growing body of work that is interested in documentary comics generally, and refugee comics in particular. It comes at graphic narrative from multiple disciplinary perspectives and is overwhelmingly astute and incise in its analysis. My aim is not to critique it as such, but rather to point to some of its general trends and, from there, to draw some conclusions about the implicit framing of refugee comics within a wider visual culture that tends to underlie its analysis. As I have already noted, there are two assumptions undergirding this work, and it's worth outlining each again in turn.

In the first instance, there is an emphasis on comics as somehow a more affecting *and* effecting visual form than the photograph, especially in the context of the image-obsessed social media regime into which it intervenes: affecting, in the sense that it incites some sort of emotional, empathetic identification in the viewer; effecting, in that it might incite them, by eliciting this emotive response, to social or even political action. What exactly this action might look like remains unclear and could perhaps include anything from donating money for Refugee Action to volunteering in a refugee camp on Lesbos. What *is* clear is the underpinning suggestion that this direct line between contemplation and action is a "good" thing: the implication is that not only the is this the most desirable effect those comics might have on their readers, but that it should be the most central feature for which we read in our criticism and which it is our job, somehow, to prove.

This first presupposition goes some way to explaining the second. If the main goal of the comic is to establish an impactful, unidirectional line of force between its content and its reader, then it makes sense that critics will be drawn to techniques used by comics artists to render their "message" – the refugee story – more "authentic" or "truthful", in non-fictional terms. The context of our high-speed media culture, with its implicit connections to "post-truth" and "fake news", also invites the assumption that it would be detrimental to a comic's political endeavours if it were seen to be composing a *fictional* narrative.

There is one main problem with the general direction of this argument, however. As I'm sure all the above scholars would agree, it is unlikely that showing a racist or xenophobe "the truth", whether in a photograph or a comic, will have the desired political effect. To assume that it will seems a typically liberal, NGO-ized position to hold, and while I would not attribute these descriptors to any of the individual analysts cited above, this perspective sometimes remains sedimented into the frames of our analysis. Depending upon the compositional framework in which it is presented, an "authentic" image can be used to verify starkly opposite ideological agendas. For example, it is true that the shocking images of the body of toddler Alan Kurdi, printed on the front pages of newspapers across Europe in September 2015, mobilised several nation-states to commit to raised refugee quotas, and in Germany's case to completely open its borders for a short time. But the image was also used by right-wing newspapers in Britain to bolster support for a *hardening* of the UK's borders, later becoming a key touchstone for arguments in favour of Brexit (Greenslade 2015). Similarly, if we limit our understanding of the ultimate goal of a comic to encouraging the

viewer to take "action", is it really true that either slow journalism or comics journalism (or both) can be more "truthful" and "impactful" than the photographic reel or film footage on a Twitter feed? The worldwide protests that followed the murder of George Floyd in May and June 2020 is just one example that unsettles this assumption, revealing the overwhelming public confidence that still exists in the reality signified by the countless images that flood through our social media streams.

To be clear, then, my point is not that we *don't* need slower journalism – clearly we do. Rather, my aim is to show how criticism's general (though by no means unquestioned) commitment to the direct line between documentary image and readerly action can itself shape and perhaps even mislead our analysis of refugee comics. Placing this assumption briefly on hold will allow us to ask whether there is in fact anything more particularly "authentic" about comics drawings than photographs, and beyond that, to ask whether competing degrees of authenticity – what we might call an "authenticity spiral" – should really be our primary concern. Against these critical assumptions, I would prefer to ask a different question of documentary comics: not, how do they patrol the lines of fiction and non-fiction to further the story's documentary authenticity, but how does this blurring lead to the composition of new stories and more contemplative ways of seeing instead? It is a subtle but important distinction. As Hillary Chute writes, by calling "overt attention to the crafting of histories and historiographies", graphic narrative "suggests that accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention" (2016, 2; see also Chute 2010, 6). Perhaps, then, a renewed prioritisation of the fictional elements of refugee comics over the performative "authentication" of their images, on the one hand, and reinvigorated attention to the cognitive rather than active responses of their readers, on the other, might help us to think differently about their purpose and to reconsider the kinds of power they wield.

Intolerable Fictions

In the penultimate chapter of her final book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag disputes the suggestion – a suggestion she herself had advocated in *On Photography*, some three decades earlier – that the proliferation of images of war and suffering in our digital era has nullified the emotional affects and political effects of photographs. "That we are not totally transformed, that we can turn away, turn the page, switch the channel", she wrote, "does not impugn the ethical value of an assault by images" (2004, 116). She continues: "It is

not a defect that we are not seared, that we do not suffer *enough*, when we see these images", just as "it is probably not true that people are responding less" (116–117). For Sontag, the critic makes a mistake when they expect – or even hope for – every image to incite worldwide protest against an issue of social injustice, even if we who live in a world after George Floyd know that an image does very occasionally bear such a weight. We would do well to expect a bit less of our images, observes Sontag, and rather than judging them according to some prescribed criteria of "authenticity" or effectiveness, we might think consider what they *are* actually telling us instead. "Such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalisations for mass suffering offered by established powers", she writes (117). Which is to say, their cognitive effects are as valuable to us as their active ones, and their intervention is not always to disrupt the status quo, but sometimes more simply to reveal its machinations. As Sontag famously concludes this brief chapter: "Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time" (118).

There is some helpful instruction here for those of us reading and writing about refugee comics, and in his 2009 book, *The Emancipated Spectator*, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière makes a similar, if more developed point. It is easy to fall into the seemingly critical assumption that the media "system drowns us in a flood of images in general, and images of horror in particular", in order to render "us insensitive to the banalised reality of these horrors" (2009, 96). But as he argues, while this view is "critical in intent", it is in fact "perfectly in tune with the functioning of the system" (96). In actual fact, we are by no means drowned in a torrent of images of atrocities or displaced populations, but only by very one-dimensional and superfluous images that are overwhelmingly framed by "the faces of [our] rulers, experts and journalists who comment on the image, [and] who tell us what they show and what we should make of them" (96) – for those in the UK, think of Nigel Farage standing on the white cliffs of Dover pointing to asylum seekers in dinghies out at sea. The reason the horror of these events is banalised is not, then, because we see too many images, but because we "see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak" (95).

The problem, as Rancière describes it, is therefore not one of "authentic" or "verifiable" representation. Indeed, he goes so far as to describe the self-contradictory intuition that there are both too many images *and* no "truthful" images as a symptom of the system functioning

as normal. The question we should be asking is not "are there enough images?", but rather, "what is the relationship between those images and the surrounding text?" It is, in essence, a problem not of mediation, but of *composition*. Photographs are situated in the media landscape in such a way that they are made to *appear* banal. Photographed subjects are reduced to objects not by the photographic medium, but by the compositional frameworks in which they appear: refugees, for example, are almost invariably (with the notable exception of Alan Kurdi) devoid of *names*, and they are always denied access to the text, which is saved for the voices of commentators located on "our side" of the image (and of the national border) alone.

This, it seems to me, is a more accurate description of our media ecology, particularly when it comes to coverage of migrants and refugees. (I speak here from my situated perspective in the UK, but I believe it holds for the rest of Europe, and probably the US and Australia, too). When we reconsider the image as "an element in a system that creates a certain sense of reality, a certain common sense", we begin to see that our focus on the "straight line from the intolerable spectacle to awareness of the reality it was expressing" will always be limited in its critical reach (Rancière 2009, 102–103). This straight line underpins what Rancière calls "the intolerable image": an image that is assumed to be so horrific that it will single-handedly leverage political action and social change. But as I've been suggesting, "this link between representation, knowledge and action [is] sheer presupposition" on our part (103). It is a presupposition that demands a very particular result from any individual image, so that when the overwhelming majority of images fail to induce such action, we first: descend into critical myopia and blame digital culture's apparent banalisation of images for their lack of effect; and second: search for a more "authentic" medium, which has been, in our case, refugee comics. The result, of course, is that we are doubly blinded: not only do the images fail to incite the political action we so desire, but we also limit our own cognitive and critical engagement with the unequal and impoverishing compositional systems of "common sense" that it should be our job to try and expose.

What I find particularly interesting is Rancière's suggestion that the problem of "the intolerable image" arises from the reduction of images to either "non-fiction" or "fiction", truths or falsehoods. The critical tendency to worry about the authenticity of a single image, rather than understanding how its authenticity is constructed within the system of which it is a part, does not challenge but strengthens its transformation into spectacle: "In a world that

really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood" (Debord 1994, aphorism 9). Rancière therefore implores us to do away with the "straight line between perception, affection, comprehension and action", and instead to focus on the way in which those images interrupt the system's composition and distribution of common sense. This requires thinking of images – both photographic and artistic – not as "weapons for battles", but as creative tools that "sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible" (Rancière 2009, 103). In essence, we should not think of comics as a medium that simply tells "truer" refugee stories, but as a "system" (Groensteen 2007) that enables critical and constructive reflection on the composition of *intolerable fictions*. With what I hope is this helpful distinction in mind, I will now conclude with a brief reading of a graphic novel – a fictional work and refugee comic – that engages reflexively with some of the nuances I've been drawing out here.

Composing Refugee Realities

Benjamin Dix began working with the UN in Sri Lanka after the Indian Ocean tsunami struck the coast on Boxing Day in 2004, killing more than 30,000 people. Still there four years later, in 2008, he then witnessed the quarter-century-long civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the insurgent military group, the Tamil Tigers, come to its violent conclusion. Sheltering from government bombing in a UN bunker, Dix came across and read copies of two of the most well-known refugee comics: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. When the bombing momentarily ceased, the UN workers were evacuated, reluctantly accompanied by Dix who disembarked on the very last convoy. As the international community abandoned Sri Lankan Tamils and the no-fire zone shrank, tens of thousands of citizens were squeezed into "a world where death was so omnipresent that few expected to walk out alive" (Harrison 2012, 52). Watching from London while navigating the effects of his own PTSD, Dix resolved to continue Spiegelman and Sacco's work, establishing in 2012 the non-profit organisation PostiveNegatives with the explicit aim of capturing refugee narratives in the comics form. In addition to the organisation's shorter web comics, which are all available to view for free online (see "Stories"), Dix worked in collaboration with artist Lindsay Pollock for more than seven years to capture the lost stories of the last days of the war in a long-form graphic narrative: *Vanni: A Family's Struggle Through the Sri Lankan Conflict* (2019).

Dix describes *Vanni* as a work of "non-fiction-fiction", and it epitomises what I have been moving towards with the neologism, "intolerable fictions". For Dix, there are very practical reasons for his decision not to recount individual stories in documentary detail in his comic: "to secure and not compromise the identities of respondents who bravely gave us their stories, we have fictionalised their accounts, but tried to stay as true to their testimonies as possible" (Dix and Pollock 2019, 265). In a context of continuing Tamil persecution in both Sri Lanka and abroad, fiction provides an integral safeguard, a way of capturing stories without endangering or scrutinising individual witnesses or victims. Moreover, having worked with refugee testimonies for so many years, Dix is well aware that the insistence on "consistency" and "authenticity" resembles too closely the pernicious and interrogative procedures faced by asylum applicants in the UK and elsewhere. *Vanni* is therefore a graphic *novel*, including the element of fictional composition implied by that latter word: it takes multiple fragments of first-hand testimony and arranges them into an overarching story that is filled with the intolerable violence faced by Tamil civilians. It has no specifically avowed agenda beyond the simple communication of these stories in a compelling and sometimes shocking visual-narrative form. It is, in this sense, an intolerable fiction, challenging not only the media blackout around the last days of the war, but the very composition of media coverage itself.

Some 250 pages long, *Vanni* begins in the UK in the years following the war, where the main protagonist, Antoni Ramachandran, is shown driving a taxi through London in the comic's opening pages. The majority of the narrative is then set in the titular Vanni, the northernmost province of Sri Lanka. Here we are introduced to the individual members of Antoni's large family, as well as their neighbours, the Chologars. All of these characters are clearly named and identified, and their stories follow winding and detailed paths as the narrative progresses. The comic's main chapters cover the series of traumatic events – from the 2004 tsunami to the encroaching war crimes of the Sri Lankan government, as well as the Tigers themselves, that were committed against Tamil civilians in 2008 and 2009 – that lead to Antoni's displacement to the UK. In the comic's final pages, Antoni is shown recounting his story in a UK asylum office before returning to his flat where he lives alone, without the other members of his family, some of whom have died during the course of the war and others who (because of the UK's draconian asylum laws) remain trapped in Chennai in Southern India.

By framing the series of violent events that comprised the war – many of which are drawn in shocking and gruesome detail – with Antoni's narrative perspective, the whole structure of the

graphic novel scrambles the distributions of text and image in conventional media reports. Rather than containing the refugee solely within the image, while a Western commentator observes and describes from afar, *Vanni* instead foregrounds refugee speech, *even as* it *also* integrates that speech into a new fictional whole – a whole that is *more* than the sum of its non-fictional parts. Fictionalisation here works counteractively against the intuitive assumptions running through much criticism on refugee comics, not devaluing or undermining the authenticity of the witnessed events, but rather engineering greater narrative force. To quote Dix again: fictional composition "allowed us to develop a narrative arc to tell multiple complex stories without compromising individuals' identities and hopefully highlight the difficulties and tragedies that civilians encounter in modern conflicts" (Dix and Pollock 2019, 265).

This structural reconfiguration of the relationship between image and text plays out on a smaller scale in a number of innovating pages and sequences within the comic. As Antoni drives his taxi in London in the comic's first pages, for example, an unwitting customer asks him where he's from, responding to Antoni's reply – "Sri Lanka" – with a series of reductive, stereotypical images of the island – "crystal clear ocean", "palm trees", "cocktails by the pool" – that the rest of the comic will then proceed to dispel (Dix and Pollock 2019, 11). It is the Western observer whose perspective is narrowed to the confines of the spectacular image in *Vanni*, while the communication of the refugee experience – indeed, the description of the causes of refugeedom itself – is placed centre-stage. The very fact of this reconfiguration requires the unsettling and rewiring of the relationship between words and images, writing and speech. The graphic novel *enacts*, in and through its form, the suggestion that it is not *more* images – authentic or otherwise – of refugees in the media that we need, but rather that the composition of media itself must be rearranged in order for refugee stories to be told.

Figure 15.1. Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock, *Vanni: A Family's Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict*, p. 133. First published by New Internationalist © 2019. Reprinted with kind permission.

At times in the comic, this rearrangement takes on quite disorientating reconfigurations of the relationship between image and text. Consider a particularly striking page from midway through the narrative in which two main characters, Segar and Nelani, attempt to comfort a small boy whose mother has recently been murdered (we ourselves witness her moment of death in graphic detail a few pages earlier) (Dix and Pollock 2019, 133; see Figure 15.1). Here, images of the young boy's recent memories of his mother, including the moment in which she was shot, circle in a dizzying swirl around a central, silent image, intruding into and disrupting the present. The use of speech balloons to connect these memories to the young boy who, in the present of the central image, remains too traumatised to speak, allows for his unseen trauma to be "spoken" to us without requiring the use of words.

It is tempting and right to read this page through what Chute has called graphic narrative's tendency to take the "risk of representation", dramatising and also subverting trauma theory's "dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility" (2010, 3; see also Davies

2020b). But my argument here is that we also pay attention to the page's composition not only in terms of staging a particular (and widely contested) trauma discourse, and that instead we consider the way in which image and text are brought into a relationship that destabilises what Rancière calls the intolerable image. For on this page, it is the images themselves that are rearranged as framing text, with the effect of destabilising the authority that is customarily reserved for the written word alone. Indeed, on this page the central image is *not* the spectacular moment of violence, which is here only a framing memory. Instead, we are asked to consider the enduring effects of that violence beyond the moment of its imagistic capture – effects, we should add, that are almost always foreclosed by the spectacle-driven compositions and configurations of our media streams. In addition to its dramatisation of the war's traumatic effects, we might also read this page for the way in which it rewires the narrative authority away from the text and towards the image in order to establish a new narrative of common sense. Recomposing our visual culture in this way, it opens up space for a progressive critique that is not reliant for its purpose or validity on abstract notions of either empathetic affect or political effect.

A similar technique is used in another page towards the end of the comic, in which Antoni narrates the final threads of his story, including his reunification with his wife and daughter after a long period of internment and torture (Dix and Pollock 2019, 241; see Fig. 2). Rather than show us these scenes "live", so to speak, Pollock again draws this moment in a central, static image – though this image is now located in the past, rather than the present – and gives the panel a sepia tone to gloss it as a precious memory for Antoni. Around this past image is the present of the story's telling, where Antoni describes what is happening in that central image to his legal representative in the asylum application office. With this framing structure, it is no longer a journalist or a news anchor or a commentator who explains the image, but Antoni himself. The fact that Antoni's speech is reproduced in Tamil script first, before being translated into English, deepens the compositional emphasis on the refugee's ownership over – and his singular access to – the descriptive, written text. The effect is to upend the conventional framing of refugee "bodies [as] an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak" (Rancière 2009, 96): as scholars of multilingual comics have shown, the fact that the text has to be translated but the images do not reminds us that comics are not a language, but "a visual semiotic *system*", one that allows us critical purchase on the system of the intolerable image (see Bramlett 28). In the context of this panel, the attention that is drawn to the disjunct between text and image grants Antoni the right to explain and to own the

crucial moment in which he was reunited with his family. Indeed, as we read on we realise that the family have already been separated all over again, Antoni forced to leave his wife and daughter in Chennai, while he attempts to secure asylum in the UK. The effect is not only to implicate Britain's punitive border regime as a crucial node in a system of circular violence, though this is achieved. The disorientating narrative direction and temporality of these pages encourage readers to consider critically new ways of seeing and to think carefully about more expansive ways of taking action as well.

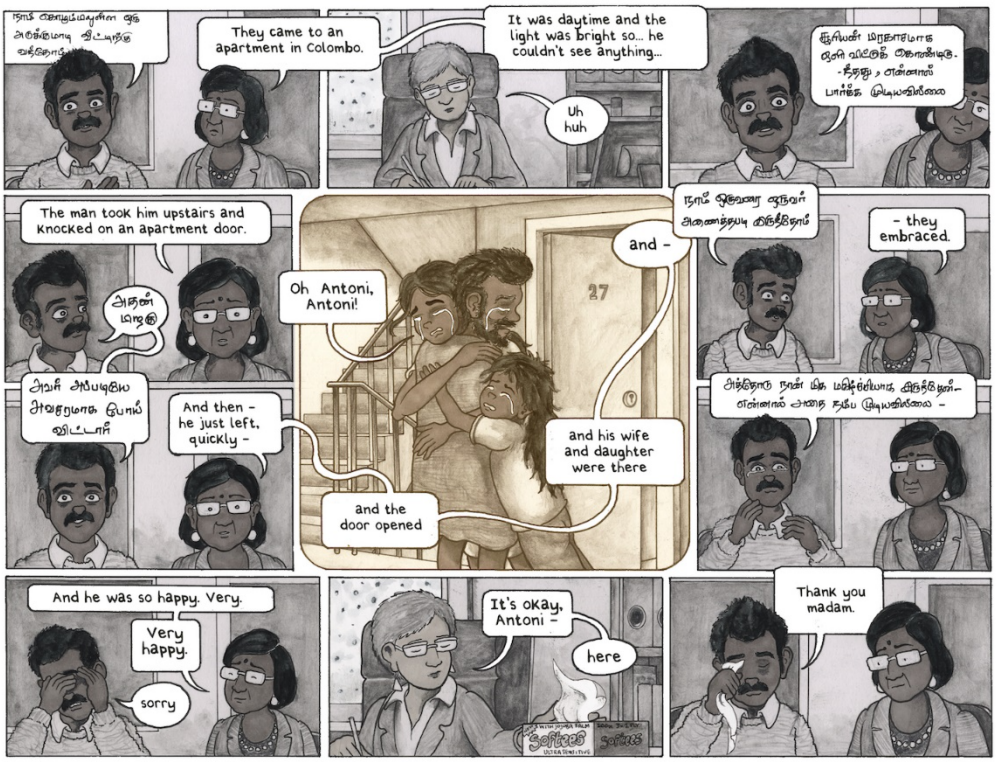

Figure 15.2. Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock, *Vanni: A Family's Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict*, p. 241. First published by New Internationalist © 2019. Reprinted with kind permission.

By embracing the power of fiction to communicate the truth of the refugee experience, *Vanni* is thus able to construct refugee stories in images that do not reductively assume a straight

line between their readerly perception and an ambiguously defined political action, but that instead build new configurations of what can be thought of, what can be seen, and only then what action might be possible. Rather than subscribing to the spectacle of the "authentic" image, we might instead subscribe to *Vanni*'s compositional method, de-emphasising the ultimately futile search for the single image that will spark a conflagration of refugee solidarity (as much as we might want this to happen), and instead pushing for stories that might redefine the "common sense" values that underpin the construction and composition of our visual culture itself. As Rancière might suggest, comics effectively challenge contemporary distributions of visual power by composing "new relations between words and visible forms, speech and writing, a here and an elsewhere, a then and a now" (2009, 102), and in so doing they conceive the possibility of new refugee realities. As committed readers and teachers of refugee comics, this should be our point of departure as well.

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