REFUGEES WELCOME?

A study of Structural Apathy towards refugees in Sweden- How can illustrative storytelling challenge the socio-political restrictions of independent refugee narrations in Sweden?

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the tool of illustrative storytelling to challenge governmental restrictions faced by refugee narratives in Sweden. This exploration will be done through the study of stereotypes that stigmatise the refugee’s identity. The figure of the refugee is often shaped by the visual representation one consumes via mass media and the words one hears in political debates and social discourse. Refugees are often portrayed as immigrants and nothing but immigrants, faceless victims on news, and often de-named suffering people drowning in some ocean. This portrayal makes the humanity of the refugee invisible. A human who has a face, a name, a past, a story beyond his/her refugee story, and most importantly an identity and rights.

I have always witnessed the portrayal of refugees – and myself as one of them- in the media as an act of dehumanization, a misuse of terminology describing me and my situation in political and social discourse, and the effects of these factors on refugees. I have always struggled with the entitlement this invisibility and misrepresentation gives to people. I sense this every time people talk to me, talk about me, and/or talk on my behalf. This misrepresentation always portrayed me as a “problem”. The refugee has always been a crisis, “A global refugee crisis”, “An integration crisis”, and a “European migrant crisis”. This use of terminology results in a lot of feelings that become politicised and socialised such as fear, apathy, empathy and sometimes hate.

This study will present an exploration of such feelings and their significance to the refugee situation. I will present a critical analysis on the representation of the refugee through a research on Swedish media, political discourse, and the design executed by the Migration Board’s office in Stockholm. The research will be supported by a visual outcome in the form of a graphic novel that narrates two parallel stories. One story is my own experience as an asylum seeker, and the other is a narration of the overall refugee situation in Sweden. The two stories will be treated on two different levels, a personal one and a journalistic one. Illustration as a tool here serves an aim beyond its practical aspect of depicting a narration. It is a resistance against the restrictions of filming, recording, and photographing whatever happens inside the Migration Board’s offices in Sweden. It is a significant tool that educates, interprets, and re-contextualises the right of refugees to tell their own stories as well as document and expose a history told by our oppressors. Illustration here serves an aim of narrating a story that is not institutionalised but provides the reader with cultural understanding and access to a world only the refugee can depict.
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Chapter 01: Introduction

1.1 Narrating the “Other’s” story

The aim of this project is to educate and highlight the importance of re-narrating the stories of refugees from a refugee perspective. The purpose of this is rejecting and resisting to narrow our existence as refugees to the stereotypes that western media has embedded in our culture.

I arrived in Sweden at age 13 as an asylum seeker, and I always thought that once I would step on Swedish grounds, I would be able to develop some superpower. I always thought that the beautiful things I have heard about Sweden, its generous practice of human rights, its respect of children’s and women’s rights would for sure give me a superpower. Soon after I arrived, I realised that a nation that claims to be widely democratic for its citizens and sells the European fantasy could also be strictly enclosed and restricted for many others. I also realised; I was the others.

My role as an illustrator came to the fore when I decided to visit the migration office in Stockholm to book a time for an application. I was welcomed with a voice of reproach from the receptionist. While he blamed me for being part of a number that shouldn’t have exceeded the planned political maintenance of refugee statistics in Sweden, I paid attention to the design of the office that allowed him to speak to me in such a way. As the office was full of cameras watching me and signs forbidding me from documenting whatever happens inside the walls of that office, it is important to acknowledge that the way the receptionist talked to me is a protected pattern that is well alive beyond a worker having a bad day or a mean migration officer. Therefore, my graphic novel starts with this incident.

Pages 14-15
Refugees Welcome
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Accessed June 2020
1.2 Research question and context

This study aims to mainly explore the research question; How can illustrative storytelling challenge the socio-political restrictions of independent refugee narrations in Sweden?

While an executive institution like the Migration Board forbids us to document stories that happen inside the walls of its offices, some politicians, artists, and institutions tell our stories on our behalf. They usually tell our stories for multiple reasons. These stories and their purpose will be further analysed in the coming chapters. However, what is important to highlight at this stage is the fact that these narratives often come from parties that do not have first-hand experiences of being a refugee, nor serve with their narratives the refugee case in any way. Instead, these narratives might suggest false realities about the refugee that can in turn create misleading stereotypical associations to refugees.

1.3 Background

The illustration aspect of this project is crucial as it is part of its educational content. Illustration here allows me to take back the ownership of my own story as a refugee. This project is an illustrated narrative that takes away the entitlement of Western media to portray our identity. A portrayal that is often false. Therefore, visual references in this research were crucial. I have divided my visual research into two parts. A research that explores the portrayal of the refugee made by
non-refugee parties and a visual research that I have had as an inspiration to my own illustrative production.

As for my first visual research, the research on the Swedish depiction of the refugee, I have been interested in election videos by political parties addressing the refugee situation. An example of those are:

Sweden Democrats (SD)
Election movie, 2010.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkRdth8AHc

I have also been investigating the public reaction to different topics on the refugee situation, an example of this is:

Migrant kids with "Resignation Syndrome", a hoax to get into Sweden.
https://altcensored.com/watch?v=_aKpwmoOSF_g

In addition to reviewing multiple visual resources in Sweden, I have also been interested in the international depiction of the refugee. I have especially been interested in sources that claim to stand with the refugee. One of those materials is the work of the famous artist Ai Weiwei who chose to depict himself as the child refugee, Alan Kurdi1. I will discuss all these visual references explicitly in chapter 02 and 03.

I decided to respond to this visual material through illustration. An example of this is the pages 90-91 from my book.
In the spread above, I criticise the depiction of the far-right political party Sweden Democrats (SD). The illustrative aspect here comments on the content and effects of the Sweden Democrats (SD) movie. As the text in the spread mocks the depiction of Sweden as almost ‘A war zone’, the illustration of the cloud comes as irony to the bubble of fear and irrationality that the Sweden Democrats (SD) aims to create through their movies. I feel and want the reader to feel that this bubble is not realistic, that the dark depiction the party creates is something beyond what is truly happening on Swedish grounds. It is a fantasy floating in the air. A fantasy that refugees do not belong to.

The use of language in the video is one that is superior to refugees. It is a language that depicts refugees as people who carry any “problem” Sweden goes through. Refugees are depicted as people who want to destroy the nation with their “less” civilised/educated/mannered identities. Here comes another irony in my illustration, the ladder. I tried to depict the claim that the refugee needs to climb a cultural ladder to reach a more civilised level and be able to exist in the same world as the far right’s one.

For my second part, I chose to only look for eastern references and first-hand experiences of artists who left countries of conflict to become refugees, and artists who could not leave their nations and depicted the conflicts instead. I have been particularly interested in artists working with loss, sorrow, and dehumanisation such as Saad Yagan from Syria:
This piece was highly inspirational to my depictions of the nation where the refugee comes from. This can be clearly seen through the pages 16-17 from my book. I am highly influenced by the way Saad Yagan draws eyes in his pieces. Usually closed, leaning down, and experiencing sadness beyond tears. I was also influenced by the presence and impact hands have in his drawings. The way my characters use their hands was helpful to lead the reader in my book to understand the importance of the refugee background in their journey. Hands, usually covering eyes helped me show in a simple drawing the horror refugees witness before they arrive to a nation that depicts them as horror themselves.
Thus, a refugee is someone who left their country without any choices for life, somebody who had to leave their country, who was forced, and who had no alternative.
Another big source of visual inspiration was Serwan Baran’s works. Serwan is a Kurdish Iraqi artist who mainly depicts the effects of the Iraqi regime on Kurds during the leadership of the dictator Saddam Hussein. To me as a viewer, the strength of Baran’s work is mainly existent in his choice and use of colours. Very vivid, screaming, and moving use of colours. While, I was inspired by Yagan’s shapes of sadness, I was highly influenced by Baran’s graphic choice of colours. The combination of both factors helped me to keep a vivid depiction of what the migration process leads refugees to go through in Sweden.
Chapter 02: The power of illustration

2.1 The symbolic and the realistic

I chose to depict myself in the novel in two ways. The depiction of my figure throughout the novel is one that expresses my feelings; therefore, it comes in two forms: a more realistic figure and a symbolic one.

Since my book deals mainly with the dehumanisation that the process of migration leads refugees to, I decided to create a depiction of my figure in those moments. I chose to depict my figure as a human who is only left with flesh, blood, and sorrow.

In contrast, my other figure embraces factors that highlight my identity beyond the dehumanisation that the migration process does to me. It is a figure that has hair, clothes, and is depicted in many illustrations as a person with company, joy, and colours.

My dehumanised figure usually is a figure that has a long head. I tried to depict through that the physical effects that this process carries. A headache is all I can remember from my encounters with the Migration Board, a headache that usually makes my head feel very heavy and thus very long. I usually experience the anxiety that my asylum process provokes through stomach pain, insomnia, weakness, and fatigue. These factors all make me feel very pale, exposed, and weak. I aimed to depict all these aspects through my figure:
I decided to introduce the two figures very early in the book with hope that the reader is able to follow associated feelings that the main character experiences in different situations on a constant level.

I aspired through this to not leave the reader with only situations of oppression but also invite them to view how the refugee experiences those situations.
After introducing the main character to the reader in its two versions, I narrate the encounter I had with the migration worker in pages 12-13 and follow that up with the question that the book discusses; Are refugees really welcome?

2.2 My role as an illustrator

In the early stages of my process, I found myself falling into reproducing stereotypes that I wish to break, and instead of fighting the afore-mentioned depictions, I was going to fall into reproducing them. Therefore, I am aiming to explore “the visibility” of the visitor who is myself in this case. I am a refugee who sought asylum as a 13-year-old, but I have not necessarily experienced all encounters a refugee might go through in Sweden. Therefore, even though I am in most parts of my project the subject myself “the refugee”, I still visit other worlds of discrimination that other refugees go through. So how can I as an illustrator invite the viewer to the subject’s world and not to my own world?

I was reminded by this last year when I decided to visit a hotel where refugees stay once they arrive to Sweden as part of my project. It was the same hotel where I stayed as a child. I felt like I was reproducing all stereotypes I am trying to break. My visit was unnecessary and superior in a way. I understood then that once I left that place, I started to develop another power structure in society even if I am still a refugee. I learned from this encounter that an aware study is a study that has room for self-criticism.
Another layer I discovered due to this incident is the relationship between me the creator of the work and the consumer of it. I as a refugee here might fall under the category of representing all refugees and thus my depiction of my dehumanisation might result in victimising and dehumanising other or all refugees. Therefore, I am interested in exploring the viewer’s relationship to certain compositions. What is the power structure given to the reader from me as a creator of the work? Most of my illustrations are about the depiction of refugees as victims to socio-political patterns. However, how can I as an illustrator create a work that portrays the subject as a victim who is not more accessible to the viewer than they choose to be? How can I as an illustrator explore visual portrayals and compositions that do not depict the refugee as fully accessible to the reader? How does illustration portray the refugee as a person who experiences oppressive patterns but exists as a human beyond those patterns with a life, a story, a family, happiness and most importantly dignity? How can a depiction of a victim position them in a stronger role than the reader who is not affected by the same oppressive pattern?

As a response to my visit to the hotel, I tried to touch upon these questions in another spread in my book:
I learned from my visit to the hotel that I as a visitor might reproduce a superior narrative even if my intentions are different. Therefore, I chose to depict my own experience at that hotel at age 13 and decided to point out to the reader that this exposure I provide them with does not necessarily give them accessibility to my being. I chose to depict that aspect through parts of my identity that exist beyond the understanding of a foreign reader. I depicted this part using a short and simple sentence in Arabic. While the viewer here has a viewing perspective that looks at the main character from above, I allow them to acknowledge their higher power structure being outside that hotel. However, they are reminded by their limitation to access this world through the Arabic sentence. I wish with these questions to constantly remind myself of my aim with the book. I am constantly creating a careful positioning of the refugee in relation to the reader. The question; “how to provoke cultural understanding rather than sympathy?” is therefore constantly existent throughout my process. My research questions were not only a starting point to my study, they were a constant reminder of the possibility of self-criticism and how that can keep my work in track.
2.3 Illustrating research

The institutional narrative of the refugee in Sweden (The refugee as an irrational and overreacting being)

As the book starts with an incident in the office of the Migration Board, I decided to start analysing the designs made by this institution. The designs made by the Migration Board to tell our stories. The Migration Board commissioned the creators of the popular children comic book Bamse to depict children deportation as a happy possible ending to a child’s migration process. I decided to put my comment on this in a spread with two pages. A page that the Migration Board claims, and a page facing it with some facts about refugee children with deportation decisions. I aimed to comment on this banal depiction with a voice that carries this institutional responsibility towards what truly happens to refugees. Throughout the whole book, I drew the text. I did this with the aim of adding a factor that highlights my ownership of the narrative. However, on this spread and as a comment on the Migration Board’s denial of what deportation could lead some children to, I chose to use a font that is not individual, a font that is more institutionalised. I did this with the intention of showing what responsibility and voice the Migration Board should carry.
The political narrative (the refugee as an economic migrant/threat)

Big part of my research was related to terminology. The terminology used in political discourse and institutions to describe refugees was a very intriguing aspect that I tried to explore. I became particularly interested in the misuse of terminology. I found out that this tool is wisely applied in far-right commercials against refugees in Sweden. A tool that creates fear between groups, which in turn results in segregation. In September 2010, the Sweden Democrats (SD) published a commercial of two groups running towards the state budget. One of them being old, white Swedes and the other, a group of women in niqab labelled as "Invandrare" immigrants. The second group runs faster leaving the viewer with no other choice but refusing the invading other who takes the government's budget. The ad clearly divides our society in two groups; a vulnerable one who tries to preserve its rights in its own country and a threatening one who rips the Swede off their money, stability, and security. The group represented under the label "Immigrant" in this ad is all covered. This is significant as the more we do not see or know who or what to fear the more the world becomes frightening. We cannot deny that this kind of ads create fear in the refugees themselves as they are recognized as objects of threat to the society and thus denied their identity, history, and thought.

While presenting this information through text and while explaining the attempts of SD to associate the word immigrant with the threatening other, I decided to remind the viewer with the definition of the refugee. I tried to depict a scenery that reminds the viewer with the refugee's background that is crucial to their identity. While the ad tries to depict immigrants and refugees as a threat to the country, I remind the reader with the real threat being the danger that the refugee has escaped. The ad depicts a victim of a war as someone who is coming to trick the Swede.
Therefore, creating a clear contrast in this scene was a relevant comment that shows the attempt of manipulating the refugee’s story from us escaping danger to us becoming danger.

**The journalistic narrative  (illustrating infographics)**

In this spread, I had the freedom to use illustrative infographics and comment on them. I believe that this spread had the perfect balance in the book. It has the perfect balance of storytelling merging the two narrative levels of the book. The personal narrative and the “other’s” narrative. While I present a study of numbers, I was able to make a comment on the effects of this study through a personal story in the same spread.
I enjoyed presenting numbers visually and analysing them. The spread above was not the only chance to visualise infographics in the book.
In his Phd thesis “Legitimized Refugees – A critical investigation of Legitimacy Claims within the precedents of Swedish Asylum Law” (July. 2019), Martin Joorman examines the popularity of the party Sweden Democrats (SD) in relation to the number of refugees entering the country. I tried to depict that correlation in a small infographic like the image shown above. While making that illustration, the natural path to take was to visualise the figures that I used throughout the book to depict the refugee’s body. However, I tried to use visual elements throughout the book that are repeated over and over. One of those elements was the bags. I wanted to always remind the viewer with the displacement factor. Amid all the stereotypes around the refugee’s identity, it is important to remind the consumer that refugees are displaced people.

Illustrating theories:

Sara Ahmed was a big source of inspiration and research that helped me understand what emotions charged in political discourse can result in. Fear was a key element in my project. Since my visit to the migration office at Sundberg, fear was an emotion that I felt filled that space. Fear by refugees receiving decisions that might lead their lives to fall apart, and fear by the institution from us refugees. As I entered the migration office in Sundbyberg, I realised that our stories threaten the narrative of the refugee that conforms to negative stereotypes and therefore, the Migration Board restricted our right to document what happens inside its walls. The history of refugees in Sweden is a history that most of the time is told by parties that refuse to recognize the refugee. This in turn continues to govern and alienate not only the body of the refugee in Swedish society, but also their right to representation and recognition. I was overwhelmed by signs that order me not to document nor tell my story outside the migration office.

In Sara Ahmed’s “The Cultural Politics of Emotion”, the author explains how Fear works to restrict certain bodies. Generally, when one fears, the body shrinks to avoid the threat that creates this emotion. This shrinkage is significant as it causes certain bodies to take less space in society. On the other hand, the nationalist’s fear extends their body and urges them to embrace their inhabitancy. This happens as a demonstration against any invasion that might mark the occupation of any spaces in that nation.

I decided to depict the fear of the nationalist from the other “the refugee” in two spreads in my book. The two spreads depicted this fear on two different visual levels.
I aimed to deconstruct the overreactive refugee figure that the Migration Board tried to depict in the Bamse comic. In that comic, refugees are depicted as overreactive to deportation and that deportation is a fun outcome to one’s asylum process. Instead, I believe that accepting the fear that the right-wing parties try to embed in our societies, the fear of refugees, is exactly what over-acting is.

The spatial and bodily fear differs from the refugee and the nationalist. During my examination, my opponent Mahmoud Keshavarz highlighted the fact that colonial visualisations always gave the coloniser access to the “Other’s” body but we never have access to the coloniser’s body. The coloniser always expects the ownership of the Other’s identity and spatial existence; therefore, the spatial fear politics of the refugee and the nationalist are different. An example of how the coloniser depicts the easterner through the ownership and accessibility to the easterner’s body is embedded in these images:
There is a thread in the three images above that is repeated to a certain extent in the Sweden Democrats campaign videos and that contribute to the fear between nationalists and refugees. The images are of Moorish women taken by French male photographers during The French Colonialism of Algeria.

Due to the cover that the Moorish women wear in the public space as shown in the picture to the left, there is a mystery and inaccessibility that these women create towards anyone in the public space including the coloniser. The coloniser depicts that secrecy as part of the process of accessibility he then gives to the Western viewer through photographs sold as post cards in France and other western countries. The coloniser then depicts these women as encaged inside the private space, they seem to be in a prison and thus need to be saved like the second image shows. This secrecy and vulnerability are finally broken in the form of nudity. They are broken in the form of accessibility that views the body that these women choose to cover in the public space. The viewer is allowed here to enter a world that the women choose to hide. Therefore, everything the western viewer knows about these women is through these invasive photographs.

This process is similar to the nationalist’s videos depicting refugees in Sweden.

Sverigedemokraternas valfilm 2010
Sverigedemokraterna
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkRRdth8AHc
Accessed June 2020
The similarity is in the visualisation of the “Other’s” body, the immigrant, or the refugee. First, Sweden Democrats (SD) constructs this frightening yet mysterious body, a body that we do not have access to and therefore we fear more. The fear of the unknown is always more frightening. Then, once we have accessibility to know that “Other”, we learn that it is a destructive other, another that will destroy the nation.

What happens if I turn the roles as an illustrator and give the reader access to the nationalist’s body. The frightened, naked, exposed, and vulnerable body that fears me?

In this illustration, I tried to not only depict the nationalist as frightened and exposed, but also as someone who cannot have access to my identity. Therefore, the Arabic here makes a statement that says; only because I decide to tell you part of my story, it does not mean that you have full access to my identity.

In Fanon’s book, black skin, white masks Fanon writes:

"Look, a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.
'Look, a Negro! It was true. It amused me.
'Look, a Negro!' The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.
'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened! Frightened! Frightened!' Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible."
Fanon describes an encounter in the train when a black man sits facing a white boy. The white boy fears the black man and starts to cry, he starts to scream. The black man fears the white boy’s reaction and starts to sweat. The white boy thinks that the sweat and the black man’s fear is rage. This is a great example to explain how the two parties fear. The white boy’s fear makes him scream, it makes him take more space in that train with his body and voice. On the other hand, the Black man fears in silence, his body sweats, he wishes he could shrink.

This is similar to the relationship between the refugee and the nationalist. The nationalist’s fear makes their body extend, while the refugee’s fear makes their body shrink, and thus the illustrations:
Chapter 03: The process

3.1 Exploring new visual approaches: The graphic novel

I started this project as an illustrator, thus, only illustrated. However, every time I presented my illustrations, they seemed to be too abstract. Nevertheless, every time I spoke about my illustrations and told their story, I was encouraged to add that verbal description to my visual work. Therefore, I decided to combine text and illustrations to communicate effectively. The best solution seemed to be the graphic novel.
This format allowed me to explore so many approaches to illustrative outcomes, the classic comic book illustrations, poetic illustrations, abstract and expressive ones, as well as informative infographics. I felt very free to move within different illustrative languages as I did not have a background in reading or creating graphic novels. As previously mentioned, this allowed me to think beyond the normative approach of the graphic novel which I consider as very positive. However, when I finished producing my visual outcome, I encountered limitations in the flow of the storytelling. I received feedback that claims that my work needed a carrying storytelling level. My supervisor suggested that I can create that flow through drawing myself in almost all pages to comment on or introduce the parts that are not personal. Her suggestion was not an option in my opinion due to the sensitivity of this work.

Working with refugee representation and opposing stereotypes can be tricky. It could end up in producing a work that recreates a generalisation of the refugee. Therefore, I chose to present the refugee subject from many experiences and not only from mine. I believe we must learn to give and create spaces in our works for more people than ourselves. In fact, the autobiography was not an option in the beginning, however it seemed to serve the purpose of the message I wish to communicate in this work. Therefore, I chose to include my story in the book.

Refugees have extremely different power structures depending on their age, gender, status, and many other factors. Therefore, when claiming that we represent a subject, one needs to always consider others. When I started this project, I wanted to make a project about resignation syndrome. I felt that when telling refugee stories, one needs to tell the most powerful story. However, I learned that we tell stories because we need to tell all stories not because we need to tell the most powerful stories. Therefore, my book includes many cases that are different from mine.
arranging from asylum seekers who died consequently to their asylum journey, children with resignation syndrome, refugees in waiting hotels and refugees going through forced deportations. I am therefore a visitor to many stories just like the viewer. I tried to create a space in my work different than the usual visual representation of the refugee in media that tend to de-humanise us. Therefore I believe I cannot include my figure in every page.

A suggestion by my teacher was to read the graphic novel “Belonging. A German Reckons with History and Home” by Nora Krug. I believe it was a great suggestion to learn about different approaches to the graphic novel. Approaches that are beyond the classic text boxes and the personal figure that follows the reader and explains the story on each spread.
I learned from Nora Krug's book that the level that could carry the story could be done through text not only through illustration. Nora does not include her figure to create a personal level that carries her storytelling. She uses text instead.
What I took from Nora Krug’s book was not only the narrative flow but also the presentation of the narrative. In her work she includes a lot of diary-like pages. It makes the reader feel the personal experience on a very intimate level. This also helps the author to express the way she experienced different situations.

A detail from page 64 Before and After
Refugees Welcome
Hayfaa Chalabi
Accessed June 2020
In one of the spreads in my book, I use text from a very personal perspective. Throughout, the whole book I drew the text to emphasise the first-hand experience. However, in this spread, I needed an extra layer to highlight the personal feeling. Therefore, I chose to draw text like the Nora Krug’s diary approach.

3.2 Writing as process

I started this project through listing all incidents that had to do with my migration journey in titles form. I then started to divide those titles into different themes. From that, I started to write in my diary about the different incidents and illustrate whenever I felt like the stories could be illustrated. Part of my diary looked like this:
Some of these sketches translated directly into final illustrations while others needed some recreation of context.

The illustrations looked like this:
I used writing at times as a starting point to my visual production. An example of this is my illustration on my visit to the refugee hotel in Malmö. This was the starting text I wrote to describe how I experienced that situation:

**Scene 3:**

I wasn’t ready to hear; I felt the urge to leave that space as soon as possible.

I was aware of the heavy new pink coat I was wearing; I was disgusted of the sound my shoes were making as I was wandering like a lost child looking for their parents in a huge empty place. I needed to leave so fast, I could not bear my presence there anymore. But the image of the woman behind the kitchen kept chasing me. I had to talk to her before leaving.

Pause

I carry with me her eyes that stared right into mine questioning my visit,
I carry with me her smile that responded to my desperation for her help,
I carry with me the loud voices of us waiting to see whose turn it is to leave that space,
I carry with me the silence of them watching me revisit the place,
I carry with me the many eyes I had to view them,
I carry with me the many eyes I lacked to see through them,
I carry with me the ”me” and ”them” my privilege has created,
I carry with me the void this visit has generated,
I carry with me the child waiting to leave that space… and now…
I carry with me those 5 minutes like a heavy lifetime of an ignorant gaze!

Working with emotional experiences can be very challenging at times. Text was helpful to describe emotions I have a hard time to process and illustrate. One of the most challenging depictions in this project is this illustration. However, text illustrated parts of it. Text highlighted the factor of the gaze. How do we depict a vulnerable person through a reversible gaze? A gaze that humbles our power and makes us listen.

The description of the powerful gaze of the refugee in that text helped me to also depict their spatial language. As I was full of shame for the way I visited that place. I wanted to represent the fact that vulnerability and power are not necessarily related to the societal power structures we have. Therefore, I wanted this illustration to reflect the woman’s confidence and stability through her posture. Illustrating her hand posture helped me highlight the fact that I needed her and not the opposite.
Writing was a very challenging process to me. Starting this project while still going through migration processes was a hard decision. Every time I wrote, I could not let go of that medium to become an outlet for my anger and sadness. I could not use my emotional state in an effective way, in a way that is informative and welcomes the reader into my work. Frantz Fanon’s book black skin, white masks was a huge help when it comes to this. Fanon writes:

“This book should have been written three years ago... But these truths were a fire in me then. Now I can tell them without being burned. These truths do not have to be hurled in men’s faces. They are not intended to ignite fervor. I do not trust fervor.

Every time it has burst out somewhere, it has brought fire, famine, misery... And contempt for man.

Fervor is the weapon of choice of the impotent.

Of those who heat the iron in order to shape it at once. I should prefer to warm man’s body and leave him. We might reach this result: mankind retaining this fire through self-combustion.”

I understood that I needed to let the anger and frustration out first in order to write an effective argumentative text. Therefore, I let myself write few texts around my feelings and they ended up being all highly emotional. An example of this is:

‘But now… Now I am more familiar with the sound of migration officers saying, sorry but your case is refused, it is time to get deported than my own mother’s voice.

My mother who is waiting for those papers that will give me a home. Those papers that will provide me with a homeland! My mother waiting for me to get a passport so she can see me after 9 years of growing apart from her! Would her smile still be a home?

I thought of her when I had a detection with a pregnant migration officer. I sat there and wondered, does that womb make her warmer? Does that womb inside of her bring her the peace my mother spread to everyone?

Her womb only brought her the sense of me being a demographic threat, a savage, another terrorist coming to her with a fake war story. As I gave her the images that show how our “home” was burned in Iraq, she looks me straight in the eye and tells me, “But you seem to be doing fine, you are not dead!”

I was not enough mom,

My sorrow was not convincing enough,

I wished at that moment my home could run at me and hold my ears, so I don’t have to hear her question for the rest of my life

And between her question and my sorrow, I look at her and smile,

A smile that is not too threatening, not too terrorist,

And I ask her, do you want me to bring my dead body for you to grant me a home?

What is this home that wants my life?

All I am asking for is to be able to breathe

And all I must give up for that is a breath”

I was then able to understand how to divide emotional and rational content between text and illustration. As my illustrations were highly emotional, I decided to speak argumentatively through my text. I decided to create a balance that effectively invited the reader.
3.3 Intention and visibility

When making a project that represents a bigger group of people, the creator needs to not only create conscious design decisions, but also have the right intention and visibility towards the subject. During my defence, my opponent, the researcher Mahmoud Keshavarz asked me how to make a book about refugees, a book that claims to refuse stereotypical and generalising visualisations without recreating a generalising narrative. I think it is a very sensitive, relevant, and necessary question.

I was extremely interested in this question while creating my book. I had a lot of problems with artists who claim to stand with the refugee case through their art but eventually only end up reproducing ignorant art pieces. I even decided to explore this aspect in my book.

In this spread, I wrote about the depiction of Ai Weiwei as the refugee child Alan Kurdi and how he defended this depiction in a talk with Tania Bruguera. The problem that comes with Ai Weiwei’s work is the fact that the work tells us nothing about the subject. It tells us nothing about refugees. However, the work tells us about the artist, it tells us about Ai Weiwei. That is exactly the problem that the creator of a work should not fall into.

This inspired me to not fall into the same mistake. I constantly asked myself; Does my work invite the viewer to the subject, or does it invite them to Hayfaa’s world? Does it invite them to my world or to the refugee’s world?
Any project should make its subject and content visible instead of making its creator visible. There is so much romanisation of the refugee’s struggle that so many artists get onboard just because the refugee subject is a trendy subject. Here becomes the intention visible through the work. In my book, I tried to only narrate personal situations and observations that address structural apathy towards refugees on a direct level. I tried to include many more stories than mine to explain that refugees go through different struggles.

I believe that in order to answer Mahmoud’s question, the purpose of my work should be stated. I do not believe in giving voices for people, all people have their own voices. In fact, I know that many refugees have stronger and louder voices than mine. I do not believe in providing people with a platform either. Many refugees might have platforms stronger and bigger than the graphic novel. However, my work aims to encourage other refugees to represent themselves through using their own voices on their own platforms.

Mahmoud’s question makes me reflect on stereotypes in my narrative. I believe that not all stereotypes serve a negative purpose or association. Therefore, I ask, can one enforce a new stereotype to refuse already embedded harmful stereotypes? What happens when we present a new positive stereotype on refugees?

I went through my work once again after the defence and realised that the only pattern that I repeatedly presented throughout my work is this:
These were illustrations are spread throughout the book. The illustrations intend to remind the viewer that the refugee exists beyond oppressive patterns. My aim was to make the refugee’s humanity visible. As I wrote in my introduction, the refugee is usually presented as a number, we are often presented as humans who lack humanity. I wanted through these illustrations to enforce the values, love, company, belonging and colours that exist in the refugee’s life. However, does this create a stereotype that claims that refugees have strong family values? If so, is this stereotype harmful only because it generalises a refugee scenario?

3.4 Publishing as part of the process and my target audience

Publishing was a course in the second year of this master education. According to my experience, it was the most effective and helpful course that enriched my project. I published my work on multiple platforms and all reactions were extremely helpful and nourishing. The reactions helped me understand who my target audience is and in what ways they could react to my project.

Before discussing the way I was introduced to my target audience through publishing, it is important to state how I thought of my target audience in the beginning of my project. I struggled with defining my target audience in the early stages of this education and thus decided to formulate my initial thoughts in a text. This was the text:

"My Target Audience:

I aim to address the issue of migration processes in migration institutions and its relation to public/cultural empathy towards refugees in Sweden and this is my target audience: When I arrived to Sweden, I was sent to a small village in Southern Sweden called Knislinge. Knislinge had only around 3000 inhabitants by the time I lived there. I was then sent to a bigger municipality in the northern part of Skåne. The municipality is called Bromölla and only has 7000 inhabitants. I lived there the year 2010 and by that time 15,4% of people living there voted for Sweden democrats. The votes this year show a drastic increase for the far right just as shown in the figures below.
Valpresentation 2019
Valmyndigheten
Accessed June 2020

Valpresentation 2018
Valmyndigheten
Accessed June 2020
When I lived in Bromölla, I was 13-14 years old and went to middle school. I have experienced a lot of direct racism from teachers, students, and school staff. I was asked to never speak my language under the excuse of people around me not understanding what I said and assuming that I might be speaking badly about them. Not being able to speak the Swedish language back then meant I should keep quiet at school. No Arabic allowed nor could I speak Swedish. I often wondered whether they might be the ones speaking badly about me as I did not understand what they said. There was no mean of self-expression, and thus I was perceived as the other who is uncapable of expressing themselves and so better be represented by others.

The kids in the school have absolutely no experience of diversity and when there is such a potential it is met with restrictions of expression just like my experience. This group given their age is very much exposed to extreme and racist beliefs that come from an educational institution such as the school and then is supported by politics. The increase in votes for the extreme left means that the people who went to school with me, are now able to vote and they might have voted for SD as the statistics show. These kids who are the future of the political atmosphere in Sweden and who are affected by only a one-sided story are my target audience. Therefore, I guess the language to speak to them will be a bit challenging. It must catch their attention and empathy from the very first lines of the book. I want them to realise the importance of not being able to relate to my story and realise that people have more similarities than being othered because of their disability to speaking a similar language. I aim to highlight through my language and visuals that our similarities and need to accept and welcome each other into each other’s societies is beyond a linguistic barrier and a nationality. The points previously mentioned should therefore be highlighted in a way that creates an agreement between the author and the reader. The agreement is of me to promise to provide the reader with a story that is relevant for them, breaks their mystery towards “the other” and show them a side of the story that is often hidden from their eyes. This hopefully will raise more interest and empathy in the audience’s mind.

This project is directed to teenagers and young adults who are in the process of shaping their political vision of the world outside their small circles. To vote for a party that will have a major effect on refugees is crucial to acknowledge and consider while voting.”

After I wrote this text and discussed it with my teacher, I felt that it was a bit too optimistic and vague. My teacher told me to try not to think about my target audience at that stage and just continue producing. It was an amazing advice because I stopped restricting my production to what fits the text that I wrote. However, throughout the whole process, I thought of a specific person I produced for. I constantly aimed to address a young adult who is about to earn the right to vote and who is curious about different societal issues. I always thought that one of the reasons many people vote for certain parties is the way that party manages the migration situation in the country. My book would then provide these young adults with a refugee perspective on the topic.

During the process of making this project, I decided to start publishing some of the texts I wrote in hope of discovering my target audience. I chose three people who do not study or work with visual communication or a similar subject and sent them all the texts I wrote edited and collected in an essay format.

I decided to send the text to the first person, receive feedback, edit the text accordingly and then send it to the next person. I received very interesting and detailed feedback on my choices of writing such as:
Refugees welcome?
A study of structured apathy against refugees in Sweden

I would say towards instead of against. Depends on your goal though. Towards is more neutral and objective. Against feels more like an emotional stance, and might make readers feel like you have already made a judgement before investigating the issue.

last time I visited the migration office at Sundbyberg to book a time for a traveling document lification. I was welcomed with a voice of approach from the receptionist. In a crisp content, the

What happens when the state denies your case and doesn't believe it when the faces of its migration officers smile at you as they inform you about your deportation decision, and the state depicts your death as a natural happy end to your migration process - it sends a message to all refugees that our lives are fair game.

Around the year 2014, I got a deportation decision.

At the tender age of 17, the migration board decided I should be sent off to an orphan house in Iraq, the land of the million orphans. By that time, I did succeed to adjust my politics of asylum in Sweden in a way that makes the migration board go.

Desperately trying to understand and evaluate the crisis of the country, shifting from a "refugee crisis" to an "integration crisis". Flyktningströskel term used to represent the sharp increase in the number of asylum seekers. The term that later changed by the UNCHR to "The global refugee crisis", probably a less Eurocentric term.

The sharper decrease from early 2016 onwards turned the Global Refugee Crisis in Sweden to a background noise rather than a genuine concern. What political state led to this significant decline in

According to the UNHCR, a refugee is someone who left their country without any choice. If you mention UNHCR, it is more powerful to use their quote, so you are 100% accurate in that case, use...
I learned a lot from receiving feedback from readers who are far from my process and from the field. I finally tried to publish the text after all the feedback I received on Kultwatch.se. The essay was published following George Floyd’s murder and I believed it was wrong timing. I believed that the discussion at that time needed to be about the oppression against black people. However, I received positive feedback and some people considered this text as highly related to the oppression of people of colour. This was one of the captions written by a person sharing the article on Facebook:

I decided to speak about this project in SwedenRadio. However, only the Arabic department accepted to interview me. The interview went well, and the journalist told me not to expect much from the Arabic listeners as they are aware of migration processes. One day after the interview was published, the journalist who did the interview with me contacted me and informed me that listeners have sent illustrations about their asylum experiences as a reaction to my interview. An example of those illustrations was:
This reaction is related to Mahmoud’s question and the generalisation of a refugee narrative. My talk on the radio encouraged many more to speak up and represent themselves which is the purpose of this project.

I was grateful to also publish this work in the form of a talk earlier this year in Linnaeus University for Visual Communication students. The interaction from the students was inspiring. They all tried to suggest solutions against the Migration Board’s structural apathy which I consider as highly engaging.

Chapter 04: Conclusion

4.1 Limitations of this study

(Illustrations vs photographs)

I was asked to combine illustrations and the screenshots that I included in some of my spreads such as:

These are two spreads that show different ways of dealing with screenshots in my book. In the spread to the right, I chose to blend illustration and screenshots. In the illustration to the left, I presented them separately. I used screenshots and illustrations to tell different stories. I chose illustration to depict experiences that I personally went through and chose to use screenshots to address a different issue. I was asked about this during my examination by my opponent and explained that before sending my work to print, I needed to proofread it and decided to double check the word “detection” that I used to describe the migration investigation meetings that refugees go through. I realised that I used the English word that we usually use in Arabic when we speak to each other as refugees “Detection”. Detection is meant to describe a process where a person accused of a crime tries to prove that they are innocent. As refugees, this is exactly what we feel like in those meetings. We always are obliged to give proof on the stories we tell. Therefore, I decided to use screenshots as a statement that emphasises the power structures between the refugee and the reader. A statement that says I know you do not believe me but here is the proof.
When I explained this choice to a teacher, she said that the reader would not be able to deconstruct and understand this choice. I agree. However, I believe that as creators we should be fully conscious and responsible over the design decisions we make. The reader in turn is not responsible or obliged to deconstruct every decision we make. Design decisions do not always have an obligation of being direct, they could be details that are unseen, but all together help to create a composition that is well seen. The feedback I received on the spreads with screenshots is to try to merge illustration as a comment on those screenshots rather than present it as a separate comment. This is something I take with me and will have in consideration while continuing to work on this project.

Problematic illustrations

Being a refugee myself did not give me the green card in my approach to certain topics and illustrations, I fell multiple times into re-enforcing stereotypes or creating problematic illustrations. The most feedback I received in this work is the need to create a carrying storytelling level. As I tried to find approaches to solving this problem, I created some problematic spreads such as:

This spread was an attempt to introduce the illustration with the phone. I aimed to create an introduction before showing the phone with the flower picture in order to contextualise it. This illustration ended up conveying sympathy rather than being informative. Sympathy is something that states that the refugee needs something from the reader, something beyond understanding. I found this extremely problematic in relation to representing the refugee, therefore, I decided to remove it.

4.2 My contribution to an independent refugee narration and awareness to self-critique

In a discussion with the postdoc researcher Ralf Kauranen on this project, Ralf asked me how I feel about the fact that comic books and graphic novels are not necessarily as popular as other
mediums such as social media. This intersects with the aim of the project being accessible to fulfill its purpose of cultural understanding. However, I think of this book as a project with two different purposes: being accessible in the present and being an archive in the future. This project needs to be accessible nowadays to serve an educational purpose in relation to the refugee struggle. It could also serve a pure documentation purpose in the future. This project is a significant tool that educates, witnesses, and re-contextualises the right of refugees to tell their own stories in the present and document a history that is only told by our oppressors in the future. It is crucial to write and draw in protest against the attempts to silence and alienate our stories. Words and illustrations become tools of memory, histories and resistance that say: “Despite your attempts to silence me, I am loud and still here!”

Reactions on the current outcome and future plans

I received both feedback and compliments on my work after it was published digitally. One of the comments I received made me realise that people were able to sense the necessity of my narrative in taking a space in society like this comment:

Hayfaa, I have just finished reading your book. Everything that I will write about it, will seem very superficial in comparison to the depth, sharpness of your book. I can’t believe that you don’t have background in writing and illustration. 💚💚💚💚 the text and the images are so well crafted and the narration works really great. Thank you. It’s the best book I read in years. Should be compulsory read in high schools all over Europe.

I also received feedback from a teacher who did not follow my process. Her input was on how I can move forward with my work since I expressed during my examination that I struggled with creating a flow in the storytelling of the book.

The teacher’s suggestion was to divide my book into different smaller productions such as zines that could cover each topic independently. This was supported by the claim that the book includes many levels of storytelling. I was told this multiple times and wanted to understand this perspective more. Therefore, I booked a time with this teacher to discuss her suggestions and expressed my aim with including all the different levels in my work. She was understanding and suggested that I make a flow in my personal story in the book and everything else will eventually fall into place. We discussed this idea deeply and I was very happy with that suggestion. This is how I plan to continue with this work before I can send it to print. I will make a consistent and connected flow of my personal story in the book while presenting other segments from news or
other stories in between. I still aim to keep the balance between my story and the other stories and will try to not let one side be more highlighted than the other.

4.3 Learning outcomes

I am very happy with having been flexible yet resistant in this education. I learned to explore new formats and methods of working. I learned how to create a process and how to be flexible with that. I learned that one can float within so many ways of creating processes while making a work which was totally new to me. I believe this is something I will take with me. I was told by my family members that while making this book, the book has made me in some ways; both on a professional and a personal level. I believe it is true

I was happy to receive feedback from my inspiring and kind classmates. At times, they were faster than my teachers in seeing some potentials in me and encouraging me to add some of my tools to my outcome. Starting this education, I decided to only make illustrations. However, after every presentation I did in class, my classmates sensed a potential in my verbal storytelling and encouraged me to add what I say during my presentations to my final production. I was also encouraged by my classmates to publish my text on Kultwatch and to do more public speaking. I took all comments into consideration and worked to make all of them come true. I made a text and illustration-based book, I published my text on Kultwatch and started to be involved in platforms where I can use discourse more.

Even though this was an education that focused on making a project in the context of the school, I learned work ethics from my teachers and classmates to take with me in my future career. I learned to listen and to take discussions to the end. I learned to always ask. I learned to never restrict myself and my production during my work process. I learned how to work with emotions effectively and most importantly explored formats that were beyond my imagination. Starting this education, I put all my hopes of learning in these two years as I lacked the academic background and supervision in illustration. However, I learned much more than I imagined and planned. Due to the learning environment I was in, I also learned to give and to be aware that an illustrator is responsible over making and existing in a safe production space for the benefit of all parties involved.
4.4 References:


While making this book, I got often asked about how I collected strength to explore such a personal and heavy topic. I must have filled an ocean with tears in the process of making this project, but I never doubted the necessity of an independent refugee narration. I aspired to have control over the oppressive pattern towards refugees for once.

I could not have gone through this process without the love and support of my family. I am incredibly grateful to have a home that is not geographical. I am grateful for my brother who was willing to go through parts of my process over and over and give me feedback. Thank you for teaching me debating and encouraging me to constantly be reflective.

I am very grateful for the warmth and support my teachers and classmates have given me. I am specifically thankful for my teachers Sara Teleman, Johanna Lewengard, Maa Matthis, Emma Rendel, and Parasto Backman. I am very thankful for my amazing and inspiring supervisor Joanna Rubin Dranger. Thank you all for your patience, support, and belief in me and my abilities. Thank you for pushing me to dig deeper and deeper and awaken my potential of exploring new visual formats, writing, and working methods.

At the time of making this book, the chairman of Sweden Democrats (SD), Jimmie Åkesson had travelled to Turkish borders to discourage immigrants from coming to Sweden. At the time of making this book, 2233 refugees and asylum seekers died or went missing in their way towards an international destination according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). At the time of making this book, an estimation of thousands of refugees have been deported back to countries of conflict. At the time of making this book, many "illegal" and undocumented immigrants live in extremely challenging conditions seeking survival in Sweden, seeking a future that is safer than war and trying to win lives not battles.